

# Introduction

*Basus'imbokodo, bawel'imilambo*

New freedoms and new challenges,  
a continuing dialogue

Nomboniso Gasa

I came to explore the wreck  
The words are purposes.  
The words are maps.  
I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.  
(Rich 1973: 23)

Imagine a photo exhibition on South African women in history. The invitation indicates that the period covered will span more than 400 years. What would you expect?

What is photography but the skill (art/science as the debate continues) to capture an image, to tell a story, to capture what lies beneath the surface? The story may be written on the surface of the skin and/or in the eyes, some deeply set, some haunting, some open and inviting, some simply staring at the camera – all tell a story. Some of the stories are held trembling in-between the slightly parted lips. Some are revealed by the camera's eye, despite the tightly closed lips, some jutting out a little, with tiny lines almost like arrows around the mouth.

'Why sepia?' a viewer might ask, as she stands in front of one image in the collection. Surely that belongs to another era, the time when Tina Modotti's 'third eye' captured the Mexican peasants in the cornfields. (For some of the work of Tina Modotti, see Hooks 1993.) We look again, beyond the apparently flawless skin, and look at the woman – not the picture of the woman. Here she is in a distant village somewhere on the African continent. Look closer at the stretched muscles of the neck; again, they may allude to a myriad of experiences and ways of being.

In a photo exhibition, we can tour the world. Within 15 minutes we can traverse from one culture to another, one period to another. We may also linger at each photograph; even spend two hours on each. Each is a revelation on its own, inviting us deeper and deeper into the story told. There are many levels, depths and superficialities.

What does all this have to do with this book? Everything. The styles of capturing will also reveal the person behind the camera – think of the many images of Africans during

colonial encounters, see the power that the photographer holds. His (they were often males) prejudice, thinking and presence overwhelm even though he is not in the photograph – his power is palpable, even after centuries in some cases.

The methods may vary. Some images may be in black and white, some in colour, and some may be digital. The paper itself – its texture, its weight – may be different. But each image holds an integrity all of its own.

This is the approach that has informed this volume. The writers here invite you on this journey with them, through the different periods and phases of our history (some of the contributors insist on herstory).

True, photography and the written word are completely different forms of telling and documenting. But in essence they have a lot in common. While the image may be powerful in its instantaneous impact, ‘Words are purposes. Words are maps,’ as Adrienne Rich says.

The use of the photo exhibition as a metaphor also goes beyond the importance of the medium in historical documentation. Similar questions to those facing the curator face the editor – how to assemble the collection so that it is coherent? The answer may lie in the intention of the volume and the approach of the editor.

Some curators, like some editors, set out clear rules to be rigidly or not so rigidly applied and adopted. These may range from the use of the medium to the subject covered. For example, they may stipulate ‘black and white only, using natural light’. Another may say, ‘Give us images that tell stories, whether in colour or black and white, using digital or even mixed media.’

## The choices and rationale that informed this volume

Initially, guidelines relating to a length of between 8 000 and 12 000 words were agreed. However, flexibility had to be exercised when evaluating the contributions that came in. Some stories must be left as they are. Like a single image in an exhibition, some stories are complete on their own. They are connected to the others in the same volume, but they must also stand on their own.

The selection of themes derived in part from an attempt to provide an overview of women in South African history. An attempt has been made to provide a *coherent chronological* presentation to make it easier for the reader to use this collection. However, serious effort was made not to force this at the expense of the thematic areas that needed probing.

We encourage the reader to engage with the texts in an active manner and to see him/herself as participating in the debates and dialogues. We chose not to be polite. We chose contributors who interrogate issues, take them apart, turn things upside down, where necessary, and subject them to critical evaluation. This volume examines the textures, confluences, narratives and nuances that are so powerful a part of our history.

## Crossing rivers and moving boulders

The central thread in all the different phases of our history is the quest for emancipation. This, it is recognised, means different things to different people and in different periods. Emancipation is not without undercurrents, continuities and discontinuities. It is used here to capture the constant struggles and movements of women; movements that at times were seen as unimportant and not warranting official documentation. In this volume we revisit these periods and, in different ways, offer the reader interpretations and new or different readings.

Emancipation is a deliberate choice, it is a thread that connects the chapters, generations and subjects. It is the primary objective that drove so many women to adopt the positions that they did, be they chiefly women in pre-colonial rulership or women in slavocratic South Africa; be it Nongqawuse and her place in the history of her people, or women in the concentration camps during the South African War – they all wanted emancipation.

The women who came later, the indentured women, the women in the early to mid-twentieth century, women in the early trade union movement, women who migrated to the cities – they too wanted emancipation.

The generations that came after, in the 1970s in the Black Consciousness Movement, women in ANC-led underground political and military movements, women in peace-building organisations, the women who rose en masse and filled the streets of South Africa in the north, south, west and east, in rural and urban South Africa, everywhere in the country – these women wanted emancipation.

The generations that inherit the fruits of political centuries, those women who gathered in protest in the 1990s, those who built the National Women's Coalition, the women who sat at the negotiations tables, the new parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, civil servants and others – these women also wanted emancipation.

Those who are the inheritors of freedom, the generation for whom freedom and bitter struggles were waged, the young women in the townships – they too want emancipation. These women of today, facing HIV/AIDS, poverty and marginalisation, seek their own emancipation.

The women who cross rivers and surmount unimaginable challenges, the kind we prefer not to think about, these women who follow the flow of the Limpopo southwards – they too seek their emancipation. We have brought them from the margins and deliberately taken their struggles out of the confines of literature on 'migrancy' and placed them here, side by side with their own sisters in this book on women in South African history. As Lillian Ngoyi said in 1956, 'The daughters of Africa are here. They built this place. Their husbands died for this' (cited in Joseph 1986: 6).

In the case of many women on this continent, this is literally true. Their husbands died in the mines of South Africa, while building the economy of this country. Many were killed as their villages were erased by the apartheid forces waging a war against their neighbours. Some women on this continent paid a heavy price for our freedom, as

their governments channelled resources away from the social needs of their own people in support of the anti-apartheid cause and to aid the students of the liberation movements. Again, we do not want to think of this too closely. But these women of Africa are once again here. They, too, seek their own emancipation.

The path of the mother is trodden by the daughter. This is evident in the story of a contemporary Khoekhoe<sup>1</sup> woman who, in revisiting the story of Sarah Bartmann,<sup>2</sup> discovers and emancipates her own self.

Consequently, this volume brings together what has been left out in some analyses and disrupts the binary approaches that are so dominant in South African historiography and social science disciplines. It brings together a mixture not only in the voices of contributors and the issues covered, but also in the manner in which these are covered.

The contributors have attempted to present complex, textured analyses and narratives of where South African women have been during some of the country's major periods. The point of departure is that women are not a homogeneous group and the chapters reflect some of the positions and contestations that have been and still are part of our history in South Africa. No doubt readers will decipher some of these dialogues (within dialogues), even within this collection. The power of the chapters assembled here lies in the fearless and fierce manner in which some authors go into the subjects, sometimes questioning the conventional tools. Some defy the limitations posed by these tools and academic canons. In this way, the very historical event and subject is interrogated and put through various forms of examination and engagement.

## **Gender, feminisms, womanisms, African feminisms: a complex discourse**

There are bodies of thinking amongst African, Asiatic, Caribbean, Middle Eastern and other feminists which take the definitional, conceptual and analytical frameworks around women and patriarchy to a different level of discourse.

These feminist writers, activists, academics and academic activists are engaging with the discourse and crossing the boundaries of geography, culture, sexuality and religion. Beyond labels, chosen or imposed, these writers are seeking ways of understanding patriarchal power relations in ways that neither obscure other forms of unequal power relations, nor exaggerate the complementariness between women and men, nor settle for mechanistic and dichotomous relationships with men.

The lines that are often drawn by some feminist scholars between those who argue for a struggle for women's liberation that is said to be subsumed in the struggle for national liberation, and those who are said to be concerned with the primacy of gender oppression and therefore prioritise it, miss the point entirely.

Similarly, statements about the need for the visibility of rural women, the importance of poverty and the need for poor and rural women to speak for themselves, coupled with the rejectionist labels directed at western feminism, are also out of touch with the different

schools of black feminist thought that have emerged over time (see, amongst others, Quanta 1987).

Also, while Maxine Molyneux's famous distinction between practical and strategic gender needs became popular in the gender development circles , there are those, who find this approach inadequate. Often I have found women's practical and strategic needs to be intertwined, and where one is not addressed it often mirrors the absence of the other or is a direct result of the other.

Having lived in that space where women's practical needs in the form of potable water, firewood, proper sanitation and basic amenities are not met, I cannot recall a situation where these were not directly related to the political, developmental, historical strategic questions and policy choices. So, for me, this analytical framework, important as it is, fails to address some of the urgent questions facing women and men on this continent.

There are of course those who argue that the very concept of feminism is out of place in the African context. The argument lies not only in the ranking of forms of oppression and therefore prioritisation, but it relies heavily on culturally- and linguistically-centred arguments. The proponents of this view tell us that because there is no word for feminism in many African cultural contexts, it is therefore of no import and that we must go back to our culture – as if it is a static monolith – fossilised, perhaps in our very nerves and cells as Africans (see, amongst others, Dr Mathole Motshetka's work in the Kara Institute).

There are many academics, activists, politicians and policy-makers who associate feminism with Euro-American, Anglo-Saxon and Occidental traditions. Consequently, feminism as an analytical tool has often been held suspect or seen as irrelevant. However, there are also many feminist academics, activists and academic activists who appreciate the complexity of the legacy of feminism. They search for sophisticated thought processes and nuances, which are based on the need to develop an endogenous feminist thinking. Endogeneity by its very nature calls for non-essentialist approaches.

Women of African descent, Africans in diaspora, women in the Caribbean, Asian and Middle Eastern feminists have been looking at ways in which their own cultural and historical realities can be taken as a point of departure in feminist scholarship and world-view. Writers like Alice Walker (1983), Ifi Amaidume (1997), Ayoronke Oyewumi (1997) and bell hooks (1981, 1989) have made invaluable contributions in taking some of these issues forward and highlighting the limitations of the mainstream Euro-American feminist discourse.

Theirs has also been a great investment in developing different conceptual tools that take the experiences of black women, who are often marginal in mainstream feminist discourse, and make them a central part of it. However, I must confess some discomfort with some of these concepts, including 'womanism', which according to Walker (1983) describes a politics of commitment to survival of women and men alike, rather than an adversarial separatism. There is no doubt that Walker's contribution helped to highlight the different forms of expression of women's status as informed by their location, the connection with other forms of oppression and the need to build common platforms with men.

Writers like Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Helen Bradford, Nthabiseng Motsemme, Gabeba Baderoon and Desiree Lewis, amongst others, deal with these issues in their various contributions, in this volume and elsewhere. The issue does not necessarily lie with feminism, but rather with the importance of recognising women's multiple and varied experiences and identities, and with building a feminist theoretical, conceptual and ideological response that is centred on this.

Another important intervention has been at the cultural discourse level. Here there is an evident effort to find cultural symbols, idioms and traditions that can offset the negative and painful practices that not only prejudice women but also place them in dangerous positions. There is no doubt that there are cultural practices that can be used to understand our communities better and as powerful arsenal in the ongoing battle against misogynistic practices. But we have to be careful of explanations that romanticise and mask insidious inequalities, be they in our own communities, cultures and religions or elsewhere.

The question is not either/or, but that, at a conceptual level, we have to acknowledge the nuances, complexities and challenges of the context in which these various contestations, ideological interventions and frameworks must take place.

Acknowledging all these variations and complexities, the collective that was part of this project agreed to use feminism as a point of departure. While there was agreement on the conceptual framework, there has been a deliberate effort not to enforce strict codes of style beyond the formal stylistic issues. This was done to ensure that the book represents divergent writing styles and approaches without any attempt to impose a uniform perspective. Consequently, authors tackle their material with the variety of their orientations and with greater or lesser degrees of explicitness.

Contributors write in different voices – some personalised, some colloquial, some formal and some with a measure of distance and detachment. This is where the metaphor of a photographic exhibition can become useful for the reader. The chapters should be approached as complete works on their own, but also as part of a collection.

We have anticipated the possibility that this may be jarring to the sensibilities of some members of the scholarly community. But it is precisely in this disruptive and at times apparently unruly and polemic mode of expression that the richness of this collection can be found. As editor, I assert without any fear of contradiction that this is a coherent presentation of some aspects of South African women's experiences, historical location and presence.

It will be obvious to those who read this book that this is not a corrective effort to make women visible in history, to write women's history or to fill the gaps which are missing in various historical and social science works about women's place and location. Such an approach often has a limited scope and the very nature of a 'corrective approach' means an acceptance of the dominant paradigm. Some contributors' point of departure is a revisiting of the major historical works and writings about women's place and experience. The aim is not to insert women anywhere. The simple objective of this collection has been to write of women's location, presence and experience in history.

## Historical and thematic gaps

A serious attempt was made to comprehensively cover major aspects of South African history. But practical issues, such as resources and time constraints, prevailed. Consequently, there are gaps, especially those pertaining to geographical areas; various forms of Africanist thinking, such as the Pan Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement; women in political exile; spirituality and sexuality; indentured Indian women's experiences; and other areas. We offer this volume as a contribution in a continuing effort to understand women's place and location in history.

This volume is accompanied by a cd-rom, which offers a more flexible and cost-effective option for updating, correcting and filling gaps.

## Part One: Women in the pre-colonial and pre-Union periods

The chapters in this section grapple with various ways to represent and uncover the agency of women in different historical phases defined by colonial and anti-colonial wars and conditions of enslavement.<sup>3</sup> Although the writers in this section turn their attention to various phases, their chapters are as concerned with complicating the picture of women's participation in previous phases as they are with engaging with the ways in which the women who are the subjects of their chapters have been cast in other historiographical writing. Each chapter interrogates the implications of a feminist history-writing enterprise.

Collectively, these chapters depart from many conventional epistemologies of women's participation in historical eras to show the varied ways in which women's agency indelibly shaped experiences and understandings of previous eras. All of them also highlight the relationship between questions asked and the possibilities or limitations of research findings. In varying ways, they bring feminist lenses to bear on what masculinist or so-called gender neutral and/or gender blind historiography occludes, at the same time that they interrogate the lessons suggested by history's silences.

### The chapters

#### CHAPTER 1 CHIEFLY WOMEN AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PRE-COLONIAL SOUTHERN AFRICA

Jeff Guy (1990) cautioned against a reading of patriarchy as if it has always taken the same form at different times and in all places in southern Africa. Not denying the patriarchal undertones and context, Guy has looked at the complexity of women's place in pre-capitalist society. The issue, if we follow his argument, is not whether women were subordinated in pre-capitalist societies, but rather to develop a nuanced and complex understanding of those societies. This challenges us to revisit our paradigms.

Jennifer Weir's chapter attempts a portrait of Zulu women leaders and the textures of women's leadership in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Building on her earlier research, which revealed complexity in how Zulu women exercised power, she argues that such evidence necessitates a historiographical revisiting of the workings of Zulu societies.

Weir shows not only that 'Zulu royal women...demonstrated...leadership before, during and after Shaka's reign and, in contrast to popularly held views, were not the subordinates of Shaka', but also how such readings of history have become possible. Reading feminist historical data from various African locations, as well as mining the archive for southern African records on royalty, Weir uncovers a complex picture of women's leadership from preceding eras. Women's leadership was extensive, rather than exceptional, and it pervaded economic, military and religious arenas. How elite women exerted and experienced power shaped their relationships to wealth, other women, control and succession.

Locating elite Zulu women alongside their contemporaries in other African societies, such as MaNthatisi, 'the famous conqueror', and the great warrior chief Mancibise, among others, drives home the importance of interrogating the tools that have gone into writing existing male-centric historical narratives.

Although Weir's chapter zooms in on the biographies of specific royal women such as Mnkabayi, Mancibise and Nandi, it also paints a picture of leading women in other political formations in southern Africa. What emerges is a portrait of women's leadership as more complex and pervasive across political and ethnic divisions than is usually said to have been the case prior to the late nineteenth century. A feminist history does not define women royalty and other elites simply in proximity to powerful men; instead, it reveals insights such as the fact that Mnkabayi was powerful long before Shaka's reign. Understandings of her power and that of other elite women need to be rethought in light of such evidence.

Rather than exceptionalising powerful women, Weir's methodology points to the importance of asking other questions from history and the exercise of its writing. Like Pumla Gqola's chapter, Weir's analyses specific women's biographies at the same time that it asks questions about their broader effect in defining the societies they formed part of and/or gave rise to.

As this intervention demonstrates, such feminist interrogations need to recognise the decline in Zulu women's power after Mpande's leadership in the nineteenth century as a result of collusion between some male leaders and colonial authorities. They need to also unveil the complicity of patriarchal historiography with such historic events.

## CHAPTER 2 'LIKE THREE TONGUES IN ONE MOUTH': TRACING THE ELUSIVE LIVES OF SLAVE WOMEN IN (SLAVOCRATIC) SOUTH AFRICA

In this chapter Pumla Dineo Gqola succeeds not only in making women in slavocratic South Africa visible – a subject and a phenomenon which, though not outrightly

dismissed, is treated as marginal and often not worthy of much attention in much literature on slavery in South Africa.

One of the central lies of patriarchal history written about slavocratic South Africa is that the fewer numbers of enslaved women translates into an absence of historical material on women slaves. This chapter interrogates how such judgements are made, and, like Abrahams' essay later in this volume, examines the regimes that define who may speak as experts on the lives of (African) women from different epochs. Whereas Abrahams interrogates the manner in which a Khoi feminist historian confronts stereotypes about Khoi femininity as part of her writing project, Gqola centres the epistemologies developed by contemporary African feminist scholars, as well as the critical writings of a nineteenth century escaped slave, Mary Prince.

Gqola's chapter insists on the development of a multilayered approach to uncovering slave women's agency. On the one hand, she highlights the importance of attention to the voices of those enslaved women whose names and biographical specifics survive in records. On the other hand, her chapter cautions against the dangers of stopping there.

An African feminist/womanist historical project has to ask different questions from the archives; it must ask what else the archive is and explore other instances of archival information. Towards this end, Gqola draws from recent studies that magnify hidden archives in order not only to broaden our understanding of the histories of these women, but also to come to a more nuanced understanding of how they shaped subsequent eras, and how their agency continues to echo today.

### CHAPTER 3 NOT A NONGQAWUSE STORY: AN ANTI-HEROINE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Another historical southern African woman who is much mythologised is Nongqawuse, and it is to her that Helen Bradford's chapter turns. Bradford moves from the premise that Nongqawuse's story needs to be revisited to question how the young woman was centred in the allocation of blame for what came to be known as the Xhosa cattle-killing. However, rather than rescuing Nongqawuse from such a history, Bradford suggests that a more accurate picture of the times emerges when historians see this era as a narrative of class and masculinity shifts.

In order to do this, Bradford's investigation turns to Xhosa written archives and discovers that these interpretations of the times vary significantly from conventional historiographical understandings of the episode. Bradford's chapter is an illustration of what happens when a feminist historian begins to ask questions differently from archival evidence, and when she insists on reading more than the colonial and wealthy African patriarchal narratives on Nongqawuse. By way of reply, what emerge are competing narratives as Bradford examines 'a wave of millenarianism before she [Nongqawuse] was born', as part of the context which shows masculinities under threat and therefore mutating.

She argues for a reading of the Xhosa cattle-killing as a response to 'an aggressively expanding colonialism' colliding with extensive emasculation of the wealthy Xhosa to create a 'sexualised scapewoman' in the form of Nongqawuse.

## CHAPTER 4 WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR 1899–1902

Elizabeth van Heyningen takes up the subject of contestation in a different direction. Her point of departure is different from Jacklyn Cock's approach that war is a 'gendering experience' and not only a gendered terrain. For Van Heyningen, war sets up specific ways of being and inhabiting masculinities and femininities.

Van Heyningen interrogates the conventional ways in which US and UK academic literature has conceptualised the relationships between war and gender and finds these approaches lacking. At the same time, she resists comparisons with African feminist writing on wars, presumably because most writing on gender and the South African War concentrates on Boer women and children's experiences in very limited ways.

As a way out of this quandary, Van Heyningen revisits analyses of (mainly) Boer and English women's roles in this war. She unpacks the techniques that framed the 'role of women in the politically necessary task of rationalising conflict and making it acceptable to the community'. She offers close readings of activity within various loyalty organisations formed by English women, and demonstrates how Boer women framed their participation in this war to claim a form of belonging to the Afrikaner nation.

Van Heyningen's juxtaposition of public participation by Boer and English women alongside analyses of extracts from individual women's diaries underscores the feminist argument that the public and private are inextricably interlinked.

## Part Two: Women in early to mid-twentieth century South Africa

As many historians have noted, the 1902 agreement between the warring parties during the South African War began the reconsolidation of South Africa into one territorial unit. This important phase came to fruition with the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. The 1902 agreement also paved the way for the consolidation of Afrikaner nationalism and subsequent white supremacy generally, that is, including English-speaking white communities. In response, Pixley ka Isaka Seme called for a 'native union', an initiative which framed the rest of the twentieth century.

During this period South Africa prepared for building its domestic economy and reconstructing the war-ravaged country. It was during this time, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that the British introduced the system of indentured labour. These labourers were recruited from other colonies. In the South African context, those recruited came from India, specifically south India. The indentured Indian labourers were recruited on false grounds. They were told they were moving to a better life and better opportunities. They left everything behind, including family ties and relations. They were largely settled in the areas that had booming trade and needed labourers, especially Durban on the Natal coast, and in the Johannesburg area. Later, they moved internally and covered all parts of the country.

Initially, the indentured labourers belonged to the owners of the sugar-cane plantations and the factories in developing industrial areas. They were regarded as property, not unlike

during the days of slavery – records of the period are rich with examples of Indians being refused permission to go out, or to leave the plantations. Amongst a myriad of texts on this subject, the novel *The Lotus People* by Aziz Hassim (2003) traces the origins of the Indians who came to South Africa and the transformation of their lives.

This form of dislocation and the struggle against it, for dignity and against marginalisation, is a thread that runs through the twentieth century, be it in relation to the indentured Indians, the migrant workers who came from rural South Africa and southern Africa, or the African women who were seen as belonging to the native reserves, and their dislocation in the urban environment. South Africa of the twentieth century is marked in very fundamental ways.

## The chapters

### CHAPTER 5 ‘LET THEM BUILD MORE GAOLS’

As mentioned earlier, in response to the formation of the white Union in 1910, and the resultant social and political marginalisation, Pixley ka Isaka Seme called for ‘a native union’. From this the South African Native National Congress was formed. It grew throughout the early to mid-twentieth century to become the present-day African National Congress, the ruling party in South Africa.

The African nationalist men did not include women in their early conceptions of citizenship. Despite this, Nomboniso Gasa traces women’s involvement in the political struggle, including participation in the congresses of the very same organisation from whose formal membership they were excluded. She goes on to assert that the non-membership status of women did not automatically translate into non-participation. After all, Chief Albert Luthuli was not a ‘member’ when he was elected president of the Natal provincial office of the organisation. However, even after women were granted full membership status, gender struggles were still prevalent in the organisation.

Looking at the women’s anti-pass march in 1913 in Bloemfontein, the Potchefstroom protests and political activities which women initiated or joined during the period, the chapter traces the development and growth of organisational participation and political consciousness amongst women.

Gasa’s re-reading of the period under review is firmly located within the theoretical and ideological approach, which insists on reading women’s activism in their own terms. She argues that the women of this early period have not been accorded the recognition, acknowledgement and attention they deserve. In re-reading the period, she argues that the major works on the period have sought to impose analytical frameworks that fail to explain or even understand the nature of women’s activisms, and what drove these.

Far from being women who were reactive and defending the ‘conservative family structures’ (Wells 1993: 1), we see women who cannot be neatly fitted into tidy boxes. Some were western educated and some were working-class folk who were fed up with the state’s manipulation. This, according to Gasa, calls for an understanding of the complex location and the unpredictable (which is not the same as irrational) responses of women who do

not fit the modes of analysis and theoretical paradigms used by the major historians.

She also argues that the initial struggles, including the Bloemfontein march, were multi-class and comprised women of different social backgrounds. This is often either ignored or de-emphasised in the representation of the women who marched in Bloemfontein, who are usually seen as having been of educated, middle and/or elite backgrounds. Looking at the actual conditions which gave rise to the march, the chapter provides evidence that challenges some of the established writings on the event.

The chapter serves as an introduction into women's political struggles of the early to mid-twentieth century. In this, Gasa begins to engage both the feminist historiography and the historical writings of and on the period.

## CHAPTER 6 TESTIMONIES AND TRANSITIONS: WOMEN NEGOTIATING THE RURAL AND URBAN IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

Luli Callinicos narrates the lives of three women from rural families – two from rural communities around farm areas, and one whose maternal grandparents were Oorlams from Middelburg – who moved to the city of Johannesburg and who have lived there for the greater part of their adult lives. While the lives of these women are different, there are also commonalities in their experiences.

These narratives show that the individual is socially constructed and shaped by the historical, political, socio-economic and moral worlds. These women's life stories offer a palpable and powerful impression of the lives of black women in Johannesburg. Now all in their sixties, the women examine their lives as they were in their younger days. They evaluate the life lived; the pain and joy of their existence in the city. There is continuous connecting back to the rural areas and then returning again to the cities. Their experiences of apartheid and poverty are almost tangible to the reader.

Feminist literature on exile and dislocating movement and migration has looked at the gendered aspects of such movements – the never to be fully restored sense of self and identification that subtly but powerfully becomes a psychosocial trauma of disconnection and, at times, disembodiment. Much feminist literature in this field explores the gendered texture of the experience. It argues that although the experience is traumatic for both men and women, it manifests itself differently, with women feeling like the ones who have done the abandoning, even when they have left in order to return or to provide for the material well-being of their loved ones. The return itself, if and when it ever happens, is fraught with negotiations of reintegration, belonging and insider/outsider dynamics.

## CHAPTER 7 GENERATIONS OF STRUGGLE: TRADE UNIONS AND THE ROOTS OF FEMINISM, 1930–60

Observing the waves of working-class women who swelled into the ranks of the trade unions in the mid-twentieth century, this chapter looks at how being in the trade unions impacted on women's consciousness.

Iris Berger looks at the connections between women from different races and backgrounds and explores how, despite the patriarchal nature of the trade unions as a political space, women managed not only to claim their space in the unions but also to contest the issues that were placed on the agenda. In this way, women helped shape the direction of trade unions.

The choice made by Thembi Nabe (ex-vice president of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union) to speak of her private experiences of an oppressive domesticity, and to place these on the public platform of the trade union workshop, represents one of the many courageous approaches by South African women inside the trade union organisations.

That is not to say that the trade unions necessarily constructed this space consciously and conceded it to women. The reality is much more complex than that. It can be said without any fear of contradiction that while South African trade unions have been at the forefront of the national liberation and workers' struggles, they have also (like the nationalist organisations) been comfortable spaces for patriarchal expressions of different forms.

Berger traces the rich and complex history of women's engagement at trade union level and their bargaining not only with industry bosses, but also with the male leadership of the trade union movement '*Hayi, lo mama yindoda* (this woman is a man)' – this remark was directed to Nabe in the 1980s. It was a compliment, no doubt. But it is here, in these revelations, the statements made in earnest, that the patriarchal attitudes were at times revealed.

The history of the trade unions offered by Berger is that of a growing community of women in common struggle, women of different races, creeds and backgrounds who managed to coexist in the trade unions throughout the twentieth century. Elsewhere, Berger defines this as 'threads of solidarity'. The period covered also shows how trade union women – including Alexander (Simons), Lillian Ngoyi, Frances Baard and others – led in the anti-pass campaigns.

## CHAPTER 8 FEMINISMS, MOTHERISMS, PATRIARCHIES AND WOMEN'S VOICES IN THE 1950s

This chapter locates the formation of the Federation of South African Women and evolutions of political consciousness within the context of an evolving apartheid state ideology.

Nomboniso Gasa examines the ways in which these struggles have been written about, examined and analysed. She questions the conceptual tools deployed by the main writers of this history, especially Walker (1991) and Wells (1993). She pays close attention to the characterisations that have been prevalent in feminist historiography.

Gasa shows how looking from a different perspective and using a different paradigm reveals the multiple layers that seem to have eluded many of the feminist academics and scholars who wrote on the period. She argues that both Walker and Wells, as well as others who have looked at this period, have not always taken into account the real lived experiences of black women in South Africa. Analysis thus results in the artificial

stratification and ‘binarification’ of women’s struggles, which fails to appreciate the experiences and the evolution of political and activist consciousness.

Departing from the main feminist writers of the period, Gasa asserts there is nothing inherently conservative about women’s defence of their homes and families, especially in the face of the state’s onslaught against them.

Calling for a conceptual and analytical framework that takes into account women’s multiple identities, location and ways of being, she concludes that ‘while Walker may have made some movement in her later edition of Women and Resistance, she simply does not go far enough’. The issue, as Gasa sees it, is not about intention but rather about the very starting points used by Walker, Wells and, later, Hassim et al. (1987) and others.

There are different forms of feminisms and Gasa questions why so-called radical feminists, who see women’s oppression as primary, are regarded as more radical than others. Radical in relation to whom or what school of thought? And on what analysis is it actually based?

She asserts that for black women all their identities are of primary significance, and calls for a fundamental paradigm shift.

## **Part Three: Armed and mass struggles as gendered experiences**

### **After Rivonia**

The characterisation of the period following the Rivonia trial as that of political lull, once prevalent in South African historiography, has been challenged by research and writing following the unbanning of political organisations in 1990. In this school of thought, the absence of public political expressions was often taken to mean an absence of political organisation (Suttner 2005).

The period following the Rivonia trial saw a rise in political trials and arrests of political activists who worked alone and in groups. Amongst those who were tried in this period were Harry Gwala, Dorothy Nomzansi Nyembe, Martin Ramokgadi, Tokyo Sexwale, Ahmed Timol (killed in detention in the early 1970s), and James April (of the Luthuli detachment, who was involved in the Wankie campaign of 1967). The story of Mathanjana, who made it all the way from Wankie, through then Rhodesia, and was arrested in South Africa and kept on Robben Island, is powerful testimony to the underground political activity of the period (pers. comm. with Mathanjana, 1990).

Dorothy Nyembe gave accounts of how, after her release from prison, she went from house to house, secretly ensuring that people did not forget about ‘Congress’. Hers, like that of those who worked in her unit and others scattered all over South Africa, was lonely work. The loneliness was without doubt intensified by the palpable dangers entailed in this kind of work.

Suttner's study (2005) of the political underground and also his personal experience which led to his arrest in June 1975, also confirms the contestation of the 'political lull' (Suttner 2001). Amongst those who were arrested in this period and kept in Pretoria Central were Jeremy Cronin, David Rabkin, Raymond Suttner and others. (White prisoners were kept separate from the black political prisoners, and while the black prisoners were sent to Robben Island, their white counterparts served their jail terms in Pretoria Central.)

Reviewing these events and historical processes now, we can see that it was also through this underground activity that a bridge was formed between the earlier generations of the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s.

While the Black Consciousness Movement emerged as an independent political expression against apartheid, its linkages to earlier generations in the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the ANC and the Congress Alliance, have been explored by many (SADET 2004). This is not to suggest in any way that the Black Consciousness Movement did not have an independent political identity. In some cases, it was also seen as a departure from the politics of both the PAC and the ANC.

As students of history we know that no period can be studied on its own. There are linkages, sometimes immediate and obvious and, at times, not self-evident. The students of 1976 broke out in public protest against the introduction of Afrikaans as medium of instruction in the Bantu Education system. The students who protested were expressing political frustration with their parents, who seemed to have been cowed by the state.

In writing of these linkages, continuities and ruptures, it is important to acknowledge that political consciousness is shaped along a plane and along multiple levels of continuous struggle and remembering, including the stories of Congress, whispered by parents, grandparents and other members of our communities (*This Day* 17.05.2004).

How do political movements begin? And, most importantly, at which point do people make the conscious choice to be part of whatever movement they join? For some the moment is clear and, decades later, they can recall the precise events that led to the clarity of thought and the choices made.

For others, like the parents' crisis committees that formed around the country as students' protests spread, the decision to be part of a movement was simply one of necessity. Some had been members of 'Congress' in earlier years. Others acted in support of their children and thought it better be closer to them, to assist them negotiate this difficult terrain with the Boers.

### **Women respond to the call of the children**

Across South Africa, various women's organisations emerged in the period following the youth uprisings of the 1970s. A number of these organisations, in the Western Cape for example, emerged from the initiatives of parents' crisis committees. Other initiatives

were taken by women across the country. The tentative and small structures that emerged grew into organisations in the 1980s and took different forms and shapes. Their programmes of action were partly informed by pressing issues in their own communities. However, some themes seem to have been common, including demands for better wages and working conditions, campaigns against forced removals, childcare, sexual harassment at work, violence, rape, the Koornhof Bills, rents and other issues.

As can be seen, the women's organisations that emerged in the 1980s covered a wide spectrum, giving an indication of the challenges they faced at the time. Across the country, in the Federation of Transvaal Women, the Natal Women's Organisation, the Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation and the United Women's organisation, women were growing more and more militant. This is also evidenced by the number of arrests seen in the early 1980s, especially those which linked women to the militant (and sometimes military) wing of the liberation movement/s.

It is against this complex background that the following chapters must be read. They focus on some aspects of the 1980s. This is a period of rich mass uprisings and a rapidly changing political terrain often marked by violence – at times involving black people against each other – and by the state's manipulation of ideological differences.

The 1980s, like the 1950s, were also years of political contestations, ruptures and continuities. In the women's organisations that grew and in the broader political structures, women were increasingly taking positions of political leadership. In some cases, this entailed a delicate balance between women's organisations and the civic organisations. Alliances between women's organisations and youth, student and professional organisations, and ongoing contact and lines of communication between the community organisations and the trade unions, had to be developed and nurtured. The joint Area Committees between the community organisations and the trade unions were a creative and unique way of linking workers' struggles with community campaigns, and established solidarity that went beyond shop-floor interests. Consequently, workers' strikes were discussed in communities through the area committees in an attempt to bridge the gap and forge common ties.

## The chapters

### CHAPTER 9 WOMEN IN THE ANC-LED UNDERGROUND

Raymond Suttner's chapter focuses on both the political and the military underground activities of women. The period covered spans the 1960s, right through to the end of the political underground in South Africa after the release of political prisoners and the unbanning of political organisations.

He is conscious of his own location (as a former underground operative, former political prisoner and leader in the mass-democratic movement and ANC) as a man – and a white man at that – interviewing women on their underground activities. In his

methodology and approach, he foregrounds this and examines its possible implications on his research process.

The women who speak of their underground experience cover a wide range of tasks that constitute underground work. Suttner looks at the many roles women played, for example reconnaissance and preparation for underground soldiers (men and women) to enter the country, including securing accommodation and other necessary preparatory work. In certain contexts, a particular activity may appear to be gendered and, as such, undermining of the feminist project. But, as Suttner argues, the same activity may hold different meanings in the political underground.

Suttner looks at the underground process as both gendered and engendering and examines the interaction between these two aspects in the literature on the underground and women's place in it.

Covering both the personal and the political, we are taken through some of the most intimate aspects of the women's political choices, including the personal and emotional sacrifices they entailed. Another question touched upon is the (at times) gendered nature of the interactions between men and women.

As Suttner follows the different women's experiences of the underground, notions of masculinities and femininities are examined and their implications weighed against the feminist paradigm he deploys. He looks at how women balanced their militarised selves with other aspects of their identities and being, including different forms of femininity.

## CHAPTER 10 ANOTHER MOTHER FOR PEACE: WOMEN AND PEACE BUILDING IN SOUTH AFRICA 1983–2003

Jacklyn Cock's chapter is located within the discourse of peace and peace building and the different meanings entailed. Her point of departure is that peace is a contested concept.

Tracing the development of the peace-building consciousness, she situates it within the national liberation and broad-based mass democratic movement.

Cock explores issues such as the absence of a single peace movement, and examines the links between organisations that focused on different aspects of the peace movement. She looks at a number of organisations, some of which had mixed membership, including the End Conscription Campaign, Ceasefire, and women in the churches and other structures, and explores the different ways in which these organisations interacted with others, including women's organisations and civics. For example, the campaign against conscription, in which able-bodied white men refused to join the army as an act of political consciousness, was linked to a number of organisations that not only supported that campaign, but also called for the redirection of resources away from the military to social development issues.

The approach taken here is that peace must speak to a substantive and better quality of life, described not only by the absence of war, but by the fundamental principles of

equality and development and the protection of the rights of all citizens. It is thus argued that such an environment makes it possible to think of peace and also to actually live in peaceful times.

Cock argues that conflict is not violence *per se*. Taking a similar approach to Nathan (1989) she asserts that in some situations violence may in fact be the only option that may make peace possible.

Cock's chapter also looks at the contemporary situation and raises a number of issues that require critical attention in South Africa today. The chapter makes linkages between peace, feminism, militarism and environmental consciousness.

## CHAPTER 11 WE WERE NOT AFRAID: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE 1980s TOWNSHIP UPRISING IN THE EASTERN CAPE

Janet Cherry's chapter captures the origins of some of the uprisings in Cradock, Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth and Port Alfred. The chapter locates these campaigns and responses within the history of women's organisations in the 1980s.

Women's organisations re-emerged in the 1980s after a period of successful suppression of mass-based organisation by the state. The chapter situates these organisations within the context of mass uprising, a regrouping and reorganisation in communities, and the relationships and connections amongst these organisations.

Cherry sees her chapter as going beyond a 'gender corrective' history and the reinsertion of women's roles 'into' the existing histories, and looks at how women participated in these political struggles. She covers women's roles in building civic organisations as well as the way in which women played an active role in responding to community needs and taking up issues as they arose.

She interrogates the way in which the 1980s have been portrayed in prevalent documentary work and cinematography. Challenging the use of masculinist idioms in films which tend to downplay or reinterpret the role of mothers in a way that fits the patriarchal narrative, she argues that the role played by women was in fact much more complex.

Looking at a famous incident which saw the community of Port Alfred swell up in mass uprising, Cherry shows how women secured certain spaces in the 1980s and led in some of these struggles. The trigger point was the rape of an elderly woman by a man described as 'respectable'. Given the police's refusal to give this case the attention it deserved, which was often true of rape cases, the Port Alfred Women's Organisation (PAWO) embarked on a mass campaign. They went to the police station protesting the way in which the police had handled the case. PAWO also embarked on a stay-away which had a spiralling and powerful effect, resulting in the rapist being banished from the township.

The chapter also provides insight into some of the issues that were urgent in the 1980s and how women's organisations handled these, often assuming leadership roles.

While the chapter's focus is on a part of the Eastern Cape, it is instructive that some of the tactics, approaches and positions taken by women there were also experienced in other parts of the country.

## CHAPTER 12 WOMEN, LABOUR AND RESISTANCE: CASE STUDIES FROM THE UITENHAGE/PORT ELIZABETH AREA, 1972–94

Pat Gibbs's chapter covers women in the labour movement in the Eastern Cape from the early 1970s (an important period in the history of the labour movement in South Africa) until the first democratic elections in South Africa.

Looking at an area that has a history of labour militancy, Gibbs examines the way in which women are written in that history. Despite a rich history of documenting the labour movement in the Eastern Cape, very little of it covers women's experiences, location and roles.

The nature of the dominant industries in the area also offers an important insight into the gendered labour patterns in that part of the Eastern Cape. The automobile manufacturing industry is one of the biggest there, which has implications for women's experiences in the trade unions.

However, the chapter shows the resilience of the women interviewed and the struggles they waged to play meaningful roles in their unions. Gibbs also traces women's ascendance into leadership in some of the shop-floor environments.

Gibbs explores the connection of race, gender and class with her interviewees, sharing their struggles to balance the productive and the reproductive, as well as issues of race and colour. The women interviewed also describe the complexities within the trade unions, as well as the ideological and racial divisions, and how these undermine women.

Having started from a position of acknowledging the dearth of material dealing with women's experiences and presence in the trade unions in the Eastern Cape, Gibbs discovers a wealth of material from the women she interviews.

## Part Four: The 1990s and beyond: New identities, new victories, new struggles

This final section of this volume offers an interesting intersection between communal struggles and individual journeys for survival and self-discovery, all against the backdrop of poverty and disease. These chapters do not negate the tremendous achievements of women in post-apartheid South Africa and the strides they have made, both at the level of legislation and at the level of policies and programmes, yet the writers interrogate different aspects of the post-apartheid state and the attendant complex identities and struggles for survival.

The connective thread in these chapters is self-representation, women's agency and the exploration of different ways of surviving the challenges experienced by women today. The section also examines the locality of women, the representation of the body and the ongoing struggles for survival and self-recovery. Starting in the period shortly after the unbanning of political organisations, the chapters explore how women deal with these issues, often from the position of the marginalised.

The contributions in this section offer interesting and new insights into the experiences of some women in very specific communities in contemporary South Africa. For example, the chapter on migrancy traces the travails and presence of non-South African African migrants, who left their homes in search of better opportunities. While their position is uniquely that of outsiders and the subaltern, the chapter shows the connectedness and common experience shared with their sisters in South Africa.

Alongside these contemporary questions of identity and location sits the experience and historical account of a Khoekhoe woman who looks at Sarah Bartmann's history and embarks on an unfolding journey of self-discovery.

There is no doubt that in 12 years of democracy South Africa has seen unprecedented changes in legislation and also in the development of policies and programmes targeted at making positive changes in South African women's quality of life.

By focusing the gaze beyond the grand national project and examining the detail, the minutiae of women's everyday life experiences, these contributors raise some uncomfortable and difficult questions. Most importantly, they raise fundamental questions about women's location, bodies, sexuality, desire and agency in a changing environment.

The chapters are placed here not as a form of conclusion to the volume. The last word is far from said on the evolution and continuing struggles of South African women.

## The chapters

### CHAPTER 13 NAKED WOMEN'S PROTEST, JULY 1990: ‘WE WON'T FUCK FOR HOUSES’

Sheila Meintjes looks at women's struggles for houses in some of the townships and squatter communities in the Johannesburg area. Covered in this chapter are the protests in north Soweto, between Dobsonville extensions 1 and 2, a small piece of land onto which backyard shack dwellers moved as a result of continued exploitation at the hands of those who owned the houses.

Women moved there as a way of drawing attention to their plight and making their housing needs and continued exploitation as backyard shack dwellers visible. Dobsonville town clerk Tony Roux acquired a court order for eviction. Despite the court interdict launched by the Soweto Civic Association, the police moved in and destroyed the shacks.

This incident was portrayed as a national spectacle, and came hot on the heels of the destruction of shacks in Phola Park on the East Rand, an incident which saw people killed and which almost derailed the negotiations process. The Dobsonville protest attracted national and international media attention because of the women's mode of protest.

Women were prominent in both Phola Park and Dobsonville. In Dobsonville, they decided to use the strategy of disrobing as a political statement. They confronted the police naked, trying to put their plight and pain across.

Disrobing as a form of political action is not new in Africa. It has been used by women of the continent on a number of occasions and is, in fact, based on the notion of sacred

women's bodies, that is, often the bodies of post-menopausal women (who are often celibate when they reach a certain stage and can assume particular spiritual positions). It is believed in communities such as the Yoruba and the Igbo in Nigeria that for the young to see the naked bodies of their elders brings shame and, amongst some groups, may invite misfortune.

It is not clear whether the women of Dobsonville were aware of these symbolic connections or whether for them the action of disrobing was a powerful tool used in desperate times. Meintjes's chapter interrogates the manner in which women's naked bodies were used as spectacle by the local and international media. It seemed at the time that, while the symbolism may have been lost, the strategy paid off as people were settled in a new area.

Looking at the experiences of two women who led the protest, Meintjes interrogates the multiple layers and meanings of the protest, the positions assumed by women, and their prominence, which goes beyond their public act of disrobing (*ukuhamba ze*). According to Meintjes, the Dobsonville incident also reveals the connections between gender, civil and class status.

Meintjes looks at the different actors in the production of this research work, the positionality of researchers and the research process itself, the media as an outside and powerful agent that comes under scrutiny and, in the life stories of the two women, she makes linkages between women's control of their own bodies and the complex relationships with the leaders of the civic movement.

#### **CHAPTER 14 'LOVING IN A TIME OF HOPELESSNESS': ON TOWNSHIP WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITIES IN A TIME OF HIV/AIDS**

Nthabiseng Motsemme's chapter also looks at issues of the body and women's agency. She considers the socio-cultural milieu which constructs some aspects of young women's identities and in which they, in turn, are remaking themselves and their futures; redefining what constitutes risky and normative intimacy, and what remains joyous about relationships, sex and love in the age of HIV/AIDS. These areas are layered and connected, if also contradictory, aspects of the socio-cultural contexts of young women's lives.

Motsemme's approach redirects her intellectual work to look at these uncomfortable issues, and the spaces in which young women are located, in order to explore the meanings and messages about HIV/AIDS and their psychosocial impact on the complex plane of everyday existence within which young people live. She conceptualises their cultural symbolisms, artefacts and practices to explore if the HIV/AIDS prevention messages are going to be meaningful and have an impact.

She argues for epistemological as well as empirical frameworks and tools that capture youth on their own terms and in their own spaces. She calls for an approach that is grounded in these realities, negotiating the difficult and complex spaces in which young people live and interact and make decisions about their own lives and futures.

Grounding the work in this context will assist those who seek a fuller understanding and perhaps also help in the changing of direction from hopelessness to a more meaningful and engaging life experience for young people.

Despite the challenges of poverty and the location of women's bodies in that context, especially the challenges of transactional sex by young people, Motsemme argues that joy can still be found and celebrated if the subject is changed, that is, if women's bodies are not taken as automatically linked to reproductive roles and disease. In this way, young women and men may be able to take some responsibility and exercise some kind of agency in changing the direction and meaning of their lives.

The chapter covers an uncomfortable but challenging aspect of South African life – the urgent and pressing question of survivalist strategies in the face of extreme poverty. In this context, sex as pleasure and desire is displaced by transactional sex as women find new survivalist ways, a practice called '*ukuphanta*'. Any meaningful work which may enable young women to retrieve themselves and to take charge of their lives must acknowledge that in this crisis, young women have not only found ways of coping, but have also developed what Motsemme calls 'flawed agency'.

This chapter is based on her work in Chesterville, a township in KwaZulu-Natal which has acquired the 'symbolic status of being one of the urban sites that harbours HIV/AIDS'.

Looking at the sociology of the disease and the mythology that has evolved, perhaps even to justify some stereotypes, Motsemme explores the notion of 'pollution' and the cultural and spiritual violence that comes with these assumptions.

While Motsemme's subject matter may appear to be dark and heavy, it is in studying the very texture and pattern of women's everyday lives and experiences that she manages to explode some of the myths and also deepen and widen our understanding of the crisis and the choices of young women in these times.

Interestingly, despite the sense of hopelessness that many women feel and the need to escape, both in a physical and a psychological sense, one is left with a sense of the possibility of desire and joy, even in these challenging times.

In focusing on the detail and granularity of women's experiences, Motsemme has also undertaken the very necessary risk of looking at the connection between the body, pain, politics, social dis/location and how these affect women in very real and disturbing ways. Working with some of the paradigms that are used in the discourse on the body as space, physicality and emotional being helps us map out responses to the pressing issues of today.

## CHAPTER 15 INVISIBLE LIVES, INAUDIBLE VOICES? THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF MIGRANT WOMEN IN JOHANNESBURG

Caroline Kihato looks at South Africa's changing population. There can be no doubt that new categories of women are emerging all the time – those with refugee status, those known as illegal immigrants, and migrant women. All these women have become a part of South African society and their experiences and location must be probed in a volume of this nature.

Arguing that scholarly work has focused almost exclusively on male migrants in the 1960s and 1970s, she calls for a more focused understanding of the position of women migrants and the gendered aspects of their experiences.

Using accounts of cross-border migrants, this chapter calls for an analysis and approach that goes beyond the economist models and looks at the importance of emotional and ancestral ties as a factor in migration. While the media portray migrant women as engaging in transactional sex, the reality is in fact different. There is a strong entrepreneurial spirit and commitment by migrant women, which is essentially the basis for their own survival.

There is no doubt that there are complex issues and layered experiences of women migrants which must be explored in greater depth in order to counter some of the representational assumptions based on women migrants as ‘victims of trafficking’. This obliterates not only the human agency necessary to undertake migrations, but also the experiences of women who do not engage in transactional sex. Kihato argues that the obsession with transactional sex and trafficking silences and makes other women – those who are not engaged in these activities and for whom the very process of migration is informed by a whole range of complex issues – invisible.

This chapter challenges the assumed homogeneity of women migrants and confronts some of the multiple experiences and the heterogeneous nature of the social categories of migrant women. Concurring with Geiger (1990) that marginality cannot be assumed, she is candid about how her own ideas of migrant women’s marginalisation informed her methodology.

Opting to follow a more open and flexible approach to the interviews, she says, ‘The only structure I imposed was that women narrate their journeys through windows that framed different stages of the migration process; the pre-migration stage, the transition stage and the post-migration stage.’

The material was accessed with the assistance of a Congolese, French-speaking male researcher. They interviewed women two or three times, so consolidating their relationships and building trust.

Conscious of her own positionality, she notes that issues such as class difference and language affected how respondents shaped their answers. For her, this has also been an opportunity for personal growth and realisation of the dynamics of her own relationship with the women migrants.

In this chapter, women’s agency in the migration process, their choices as active participants, has challenged the given notions of women migrants as victims with no voice. They are active in determining where to go, how to enter relationships which may be of strategic value, and in many ways consider themselves less vulnerable than men.

Be that as it may, Kihato argues that migrant women live under oppressive patriarchal conditions in which political discourses continue to exclude them from participating in the society which hosts them. She calls for a meaningful discourse on these issues which unpacks women’s lived experiences and the complexity of being invisible and inaudible.

These women, like any other social group of women, cannot be placed in static categories; their lives undergo transformation in complex ways. It is in understanding these issues that scholarship can engage with women migrants' experiences and that is possible, Kihato argues, if scholars do not come with preconceived paradigms and are willing to open themselves to the dynamism of the exchange.

## CHAPTER 16 AMBIGUITY IS MY MIDDLE NAME: A RESEARCH DIARY

Yvette Abrahams confronts the ways in which Sarah Bartmann specifically, and Khoekhoe people more generally, have been written into history. She argues that most existing historiographical texts reveal more about their writers' epistemological biases than they do about their subjects. Having conducted a thorough analysis of the tropes in which historians have written about the Khoekhoe woman Sarah Bartmann, Abrahams asks questions about what an African feminist/womanist herstory of Sarah Bartmann looks like.

Such a feminist project is fraught not only with representations of the historical subject that Bartmann was, but also with a tradition of history writing that denies the possibility of African women's intellectual energy. In other words, how does an African feminist/womanist historian come to a history that objectifies her and the subject about whom she writes as hypersexual?

Many of these objectifying tropes cluster around scientific racism, but some are echoed in a body of late twentieth century academic writing that charges itself with a different project. The works of scholars like Sander Gilman (1986), Mieke Bal (1991) and Houston Baker (1986) are implicated in such paradoxes. Abrahams's chapter echoes the work of the historical sociologist Zine Magubane. Both these African feminists have critiqued the paradoxes of Bartmann 'presented in a timeless unstable present in which all connections to her history and selfhood are lost', as Abrahams argues here in what Magubane has dubbed Bartmann's 'curious theoretical odyssey'.

## Conclusion

*Women in South African History* is not a conventional historical volume. It is a trans-disciplinary – as opposed to interdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary – contribution to a growing literature on the position, location and roles of women in this South African society.

The trans-disciplinary aspect is reflected in the ways in which historians, sociologists, political scientists and women who truly straddle these and various other disciplines have come together to bring this volume about.

Globally, feminist writers, more than ever before, are testing new ways of exploring different subjects relating to women's oppression, location and agency.

Throughout the period covered in this volume, from pre-colonial times to the present, women are continuously moving boulders, crossing rivers and swimming, sometimes in

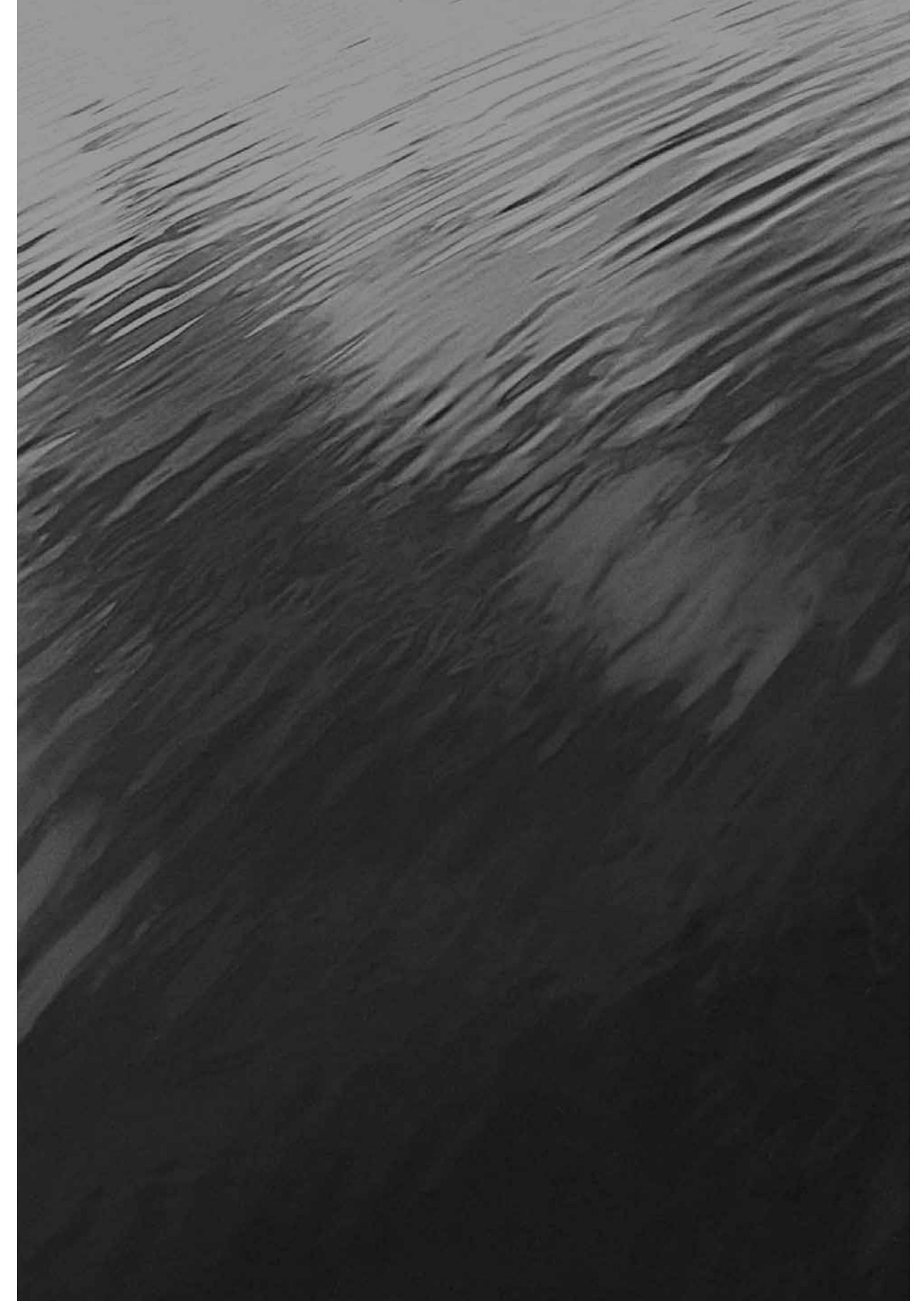
the direction of the tide and, where necessary, daring to swim against it. It is a constant struggle for self-identification, to change society and self, and to define new values and forms of engagement.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 This is the choice of the author, Yvette Abrahams. The editor is fully conscious of the different ways in which these people are named. It is, however, the wish of the author and the editor to have the choice of self-representation accepted.
- 2 The name is spelled in this way whenever it represents the choice of Yvette Abrahams. In her chapter, she explains how it is that she comes to this spelling. While the editor is fully conscious of the contestations and debates on issues of names for men and women in similar conditions to Ms Bartman (the spelling I would use in my own work), the choices and imperatives of the author prevail.
- 3 With thanks to Pumla Dineo Gqola for her assistance in summarising the chapters in Part One and Chapter 16 for this introduction.
- 4 Volumes of this nature usually include an index but unfortunately time has been against us. This will be remedied when the book is reprinted.

## REFERENCES

- Allman J, Geiger S & Musisi, N (Eds) (2001) *Women in African colonial histories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Amadiume I (1987) *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. London: Zed Books.
- Amadiume I (1997) *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion and culture*. London: Zed Books
- Baker HA (1986) Caliban's triple play. In H Gates (Ed) 'Race, writing and difference'. Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Bal M (1991) The politics of citation. *Diacritics*, 21(1): 25–45
- Cuthbertson G, Grundlingh A & Suttie M-L (Eds) (2002) *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race and identity in the South African War, 1899–1902*. Cape Town: David Philip, Ohio University Press.
- El Saadawi N (1980) *The hidden face of Eve: Women in the Arab world*. London: Zed Books.
- Geiger S (1990) What's so feminist about women's oral history? *Journal of Women's History*, 2(1): 169–182
- Gilman S (1986) Black bodies, white bodies: Towards an iconography of female sexuality in late nineteenth century art, medicine and literature. In H Gates (ed) *Race, writing and difference*. Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Guy J (1990) Gender oppression in southern Africa's precapitalist societies. In C Walker (Ed) *Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945*. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers.
- Hassim A (2003) *The Lotus people*. Johannesburg: STE Publishers.
- hooks b (1981) *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. Boston: South End Press
- hooks b (1989) *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston: South End Press
- Hooks M (1993) *Tina Modotti: Photographer and revolutionary*. London: Pandora.
- Imam A, Mama A & Sow F (Eds) (1997) *Engendering African social sciences*. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Joseph H (1986) *Side by side: The autobiography of Helen Joseph*, Johannesburg: AD Donker Publishers.
- Nathan L (1989) Marching to a different beat: The history of the End Conscription Campaign. In J Cock & L Nathan (Eds) *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip
- Obery I (Ed) (1985) *Vukani Makhosikazi: South African women speak*. London: Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR).
- Oyewunmi O (1997) *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Quanta C (Ed) (1987) *Women in southern Africa*. London: Allison and Busby.
- Rich A (1973) *Diving into the wreck: Poems 1971–1972*. New York: WW Norton.
- South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) (2004) *The road to democracy in South Africa*. vol 1 (1960–1970). Cape Town: Zebra Press.
- Suttner R (2001) *Inside apartheid's prison: Notes and letters of struggle*. Melbourne: Ocean Press.
- Suttner R (2005) Rendering visible: The underground organisational experience of the ANC-led Alliance until 1976. PhD thesis. University of the Witwatersrand.
- Walker A (1983) *In search of our mother's gardens*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Walker C (1991) *Women and Resistance in South Africa*. Cape Town David Philip (original work published 1982, London: Onyx)
- Wells JC (1993) *We now demand! The history of woman's resistance to pass laws*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press



*Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/*  
They remove boulders and cross rivers

women

in South African History





arts and culture

Department:  
Arts and Culture  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



50th Anniversary of the Women's March:  
**AGE OF HOPE**  
through struggle to freedom

*Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/*  
They remove boulders and cross rivers

# women in South African History

Edited by Nomboniso Gasa

A project of the South African Department of Arts & Culture  
and the Human Sciences Research Council



Commissioned and funded by the South African National Department of Arts and Culture

Published by HSRC Press

Private Bag X9182, Cape Town, 8000, South Africa

[www.hsrcpress.ac.za](http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za)

First published 2007

ISBN 978-0-7969-2174-1

© 2007 Human Sciences Research Council

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Human Sciences Research Council ('the Council') or indicate that the Council endorses the views of the authors. In quoting from this publication, readers are advised to attribute the source of the information to the individual author concerned and not to the Council.

Copy edited by Lee Smith

Designed and typeset by Jenny Young

Print management by comPress

Distributed in Africa by Blue Weaver

Tel: +27 (0) 21 701 4477; Fax: +27 (0) 21 701 7302

[www.oneworldbooks.com](http://www.oneworldbooks.com)

Distributed in Europe and the United Kingdom by Eurospan Distribution Services (EDS)

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7240 0856; Fax: +44 (0) 20 7379 0609

[www.eurospangroup.com/bookstore](http://www.eurospangroup.com/bookstore)

Distributed in North America by Independent Publishers Group (IPG)

Call toll-free: (800) 888 4741; Fax: +1 (312) 337 5985

[www.ipgbook.com](http://www.ipgbook.com)

Suggested citation: Gasa N (Ed.) (2007) *Women in South African history: Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imirambo / They remove boulders and cross rivers*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

# Contents

- vii PREFACE
- ix ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
- xiii INTRODUCTION: *Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo*, new freedoms and new challenges, a continuing dialogue  
*Nomboniso Gasa*

## PART ONE

### Women in the pre-colonial and pre-Union periods

- 3 CHAPTER 1: Chiefly women and women's leadership in pre-colonial southern Africa  
*Jennifer Weir*
- 21 CHAPTER 2: 'Like three tongues in one mouth': Tracing the elusive lives of slave women in (slavocratic) South Africa  
*Pumla Dineo Gqola*
- 43 CHAPTER 3: Not a Nongqawuse story: An anti-heroine in historical perspective  
*Helen Bradford*
- 91 CHAPTER 4: Women and gender in the South African War, 1899–1902  
*Elizabeth van Heyningen*

## PART TWO

### Women in early to mid-twentieth century South Africa

- 129 CHAPTER 5: 'Let them build more gaols'  
*Nomboniso Gasa*
- 153 CHAPTER 6: Testimonies and transitions: Women negotiating the rural and urban in the mid-20th century  
*Luli Callinicos*
- 185 CHAPTER 7: Generations of struggle: Trade unions and the roots of feminism, 1930–60  
*Iris Berger*
- 207 CHAPTER 8: Feminisms, motherisms, patriarchies and women's voices in the 1950s  
*Nomboniso Gasa*

## PART THREE

### War: armed and mass struggles as gendered experiences

- 233 CHAPTER 9: Women in the ANC-led underground

*Raymond Suttner*

- 257 CHAPTER 10: ‘Another mother for peace’:

Women and peace building in South Africa, 1983–2003

*Jacklyn Cock*

- 281 CHAPTER 11: ‘We were not afraid’:

The role of women in the 1980s’ township uprising in the Eastern Cape

*Janet Cherry*

- 315 CHAPTER 12: Women, labour and resistance: Case studies from the

Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area, 1972–94

*Pat Gibbs*

## PART FOUR

### The 1990s and beyond: new identities, new victories, new struggles

- 347 CHAPTER 13: Naked women’s protest, July 1990: ‘We won’t fuck for houses’

*Sheila Meintjes*

- 369 CHAPTER 14: ‘Loving in a time of hopelessness’: On township women’s subjectivities

in a time of HIV/AIDS

*Nthabiseng Motsemme*

- 397 CHAPTER 15: Invisible lives, inaudible voices? The social conditions of migrant women  
in Johannesburg

*Caroline Wanjiku Kihato*

- 421 CHAPTER 16: Ambiguity is my middle name: A research diary

*Yvette Abrahams*

- 453 Contributors

# Preface

This volume was first initiated by the then Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Brigitte Mabandla (now Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development). It was seen as a follow-up to a previous book, *Women Marching into the 21st Century*, which was commissioned by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) and produced by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2000. When Buyelwa Patience Sonjica took over the reigns as deputy minister, the idea did not die. It was during her stewardship that the contract was signed between the HSRC and DACST.

Having agreed to broaden the project beyond the 1956 march to Pretoria, contributors decided to use a feminist analysis instead of the apparently more acceptable gender analysis as a common point of departure in their work. As is often the case in collective projects, some writers are more explicit than others on issues related to their ideological grounding.

The intention was to examine the ways in which gender intersects with race, culture, class and other forms of identity and location in South African history. In looking at women in different periods, and covering a range of themes, the contributors have attempted to show the interconnectedness of social, economic, cultural and historical aspects and how these mediate the history of women's place and location in South Africa.

Linked to the question of feminisms is the notion of women's heterogeneity in terms of their identities, choices and the spaces they occupy. Consequently, this volume does not attempt to bring a uniform and singular form of representation and voice – its point of departure is the multiplicity of women's voices, identities and feminisms.

A number of issues were emphasised in the guiding conceptual framework of this project. Amongst these, it is important to highlight the following:

- The approach of this volume is one which links the past and the present and asserts that the present is also history. Consequently, the volume covers both past and contemporary periods and seeks to develop a connective thread between them. Women's experiences of continuous struggle are aptly described by the expression *Basus'iim-bokodo, bawel'imilambo* (They remove boulders, they cross rivers). This reflects both a recognition of the symbolism of '*imbokodo*' (boulder/big rock) in South African women's struggle, as well as the challenge entailed in moving boulders. The crossing of rivers calls to attention the hazardous nature of women's journeys both in the past and in the present. It is a continuing struggle of constant movement and shifting locations.

- Conscious of the complex debates and the limitations of the gender equality discourse for our purposes, we opted for a feminist and woman-centred approach. This does not presuppose the inapplicability of gender analysis in a historical context, but is borne out of an understanding of the limitations of the gender constructionist theories, especially in the African context where difference is mediated by a number of other power relations and multiple identities.
- In writing of women in history, we also wanted to make some women who are not well known visible in the periods under examination. Some chapters lend themselves easily to biographies while others present a number of complications, including issues of anonymity, privacy and similar ethical issues. The strength of some chapters lies in analysis and the revisiting of certain periods. Other contributors have built their chapters around the experiences of one or two women. All these, we decided, were important ways of focusing the gaze on women in South African history.
- In the last decade women have made significant strides at policy, decision-making and public participation levels. While conscious of these changes, gains and continuing contestations, we decided not to focus on women in decision-making. The importance of these developments is self-evident and so are the challenges which need further probing. The decision not to focus on this arena was influenced by the assessment of work that is undertaken by other academics and activists, who are constantly evaluating and writing about the unfolding political processes.

We are conscious of a number of critical and complex questions around history and women's representation in particular, and around the relationship between researchers and their subjects in general. It is our intention that this volume not add in any way to the liberties taken by historians and social scientists in their engagement with their subjects. We have stressed the ethical and political questions in our work and we trust that all information given about any individual, locality and place contributes to knowledge and knowledge production methods that empower and respect those with whom we work, as well as ourselves.

A trans-disciplinary collection brings together different traditions and modes of writing. There are chapters that encourage greater self-reflexivity, and probe the location of the contributor in relation to the subject matter. In this collection, the intention has been to write of women's place in South African history and we are part of that. The purpose is to focus the gaze not only on the 'other', but also to reflect on the position of the writer where necessary or deemed important by the individual contributor.

We offer no concluding word, no tidy end to this volume. Our history still unfolds.

# Acknowledgements and a call for reflection

I write on a subject that nobody likes.

Including me.

There are subjects that nobody likes...

Earth is earth, clay is clay,

And the potter works with earth and the clay.

(Juan Gelman, ‘Footnotes to Defeat’, from *Unthinkable Tenderness* 1997)

Like Gelman, the Argentinean exile and poet, I too live in certainties that dwell in doubt, liberties that live imprisoned by memory. I live the celebration of speech from the exact centre of silencing.

Writing the introduction to a book called *Opening Spaces*, Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera warned, ‘A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones’ (1991: 1). As often happens with poetry or fragments of prose, this sentence attached itself to my memory. And now, in concluding this complex project, it floated back into consciousness. Bless her soul, but I would like to add to her words: a woman writer also needs a thick skin, for she does not know when and how it may crack, and if it does she had better have some sisters around to wipe the blood.

What is not in these pages is the silence, powerful when chosen but utterly defeating when imposed. It is a silencing silence, the kind that hits you between your eyes and kicks you in the hollow of your stomach. That silence is not the absence of words or noise; not the kind we crave for when we think of a peaceful moment. This silence is fearsome. It is a pointed and powerful speech of disapproval.

Vera also wrote, ‘I know the risk a woman takes in the sheer effort of writing, placing herself beyond accepted margins, abandoning the securities of less daunting, much more approved paths’ (1991: 1). And it is this risk that we have taken in this volume, some contributors more than others.

Almost all the contributors to this volume are South Africans and some are feminists. I used to think we were fearless, that we name things as we see and experience them, and place them on the agenda. But then it became clear: ours is a fragile sisterhood, one that must be nursed at all costs. Whose cost? Who pays the price? These are the things we do not like to speak of amongst ourselves, let alone in public.

We are the history we write, the contradictions we eloquently speak of. At times this journey was so slippery I could feel myself sliding. If I have emerged with my senses intact it is not because of my own strength. I thank the women who built a strong sisterly circle around me. These are women who listened to my sometimes incoherent ramblings, and held my rage so that it did not fall on the ground and shatter. I have been humbled by their principled stance on many occasions – that they, the women who had so much to lose, were prepared to sacrifice an opportunity of being part of this collection in defence of their principles. These women took the risk Vera spoke of, not only in writing for this collection but also in interrogating the silences and breaking them when it mattered most, despite the risk to their own careers. They abandoned the ‘securities of less daunting, much more approved paths’ and broke the silence. And then we were free to speak when it mattered.

Like many collective projects, this has not been a one-woman show. Also, like many collective projects, it has been affected by our history, location and entrenched attitudes. While some writers have firmly placed themselves in the centre of South African academia and are protected by their track record, legacy, race, age and class, others have had to struggle for a space to write what they feel is important in a way that honours both the subjects they write about and their own integrity. Being black and relatively unknown in the academic world has its inherent advantages and disadvantages. Being unknown is often liberating. It means dwelling in that space where the subaltern can in actual fact self-liberate; speaking in a manner that is true to one’s self. But there are costs and these should not be underestimated. I have been fortunate to find myself surrounded by women who not only speak or theorise feminism, but who actually live and practise it.

In particular I am greatly indebted to the following women for their emotional, intellectual and political support in very challenging times: Pumla Dineo Gqola, Caroline Wanjiku Kihato, Nthabiseng Motsemme, Helen Bradford and Yvette Abrahams. I also, as always, am grateful to Raymond Suttner for his continued support in our mutual growth.

At times when I came almost undone with frustration and all the attendant contradictions of a project like this, Nokwanda Ngombane put aside her own trials and tribulations and held my hand to the fruition of this project.

I thank all the contributors for their participation, including those who were part of the project in its earlier phase. Although their chapters have not made it into the final volume, their participation enriched the project greatly.

I thank Olive Shisana, President and CEO of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), for her support of this project. Professor Dan Ncayiyana, the chairperson of the

HSRC Editorial Board, is deeply appreciated for putting human experience and dignity into that overused and often empty phrase – professionalism. Adam Habib and his colleagues at the Democracy and Governance Unit of the HRSC, Arlene Grossberg, Gray van de Bergh and Joan Makalela housed and provided administrative back-up for this project, despite its exacting demands on their time. Mary Ralphs of the HSRC Press has been gracious with her time and patience, always found a way of accommodating a difficult project and saw to it that the volume came out. Thank you.

The Department of Arts, Culture (DAC) deserves a special word of gratitude for making this project possible both through their financial assistance and also in extending the time, even though this meant missing the fiftieth anniversary of the women's march.

In particular, I would like to pay tribute to Brigitte Mabandla for initiating this project. Buyelwa Sonjica continued where her colleague left off and ensured that the project was not lost in the annals of civil service files. Premi Appalraju, the ministerial liaison person in the Ministry of Arts and Culture, came from nowhere in the abyss that the South African civil service can sometimes be and provided invaluable support. She became 'our person' in the department.

I thank Dr Z Pallo Jordan, MP and Minister of Arts and Culture, certainly not because it is a formality to thank a minister, but because the historian and intellectual in him could identify with the need to give us extra time – despite the obvious disappointment that the book would not hit the shelves during women's month.

This book contains ideas and opinions belonging to the individual authors. Neither DAC nor the HSRC can be held in any way responsible for the content. The writers are women and a man whose academic work and activism are quite literally their life.

Hopefully we as women and men who are committed to change will also reflect on the power relations amongst us and speak honestly about those areas that are uncomfortable.

I end therefore with a call for serious self-reflection by all of us, on the places in which we are located and how these affect what we say and write about this complex history and presence. But above all, I hope we will continue to reflect on this project and the lessons learned.

*Maz'enethole.*

Nomboniso Gasa



# Chiefly women and women's leadership

## in pre-colonial southern Africa

JENNIFER WEIR

In 1891, the Reverend Josiah Tyler wrote in *Forty Years Among the Zulus* that:

In intellect the women are inferior to the men, but this is doubtless attributable to the drudgery imposed on them. To feelings of self respect and sensitiveness under wrongs, characteristic of their more highly-favoured sisters in Christian lands, they are strangers. As a rule they patiently submit to their lot, unless tortured beyond endurance by despotic husbands; but their life at the best is a hard one. (Tyler 1971: 119)

The focus on women's leadership and chiefly women in this chapter aims to explore some of the political, social, religious and economic dimensions that shaped leadership that has been largely neglected in the history of leadership in southern Africa. Exceptions include Hamilton (1985) and Hanretta's (1998) work (see later). Hamilton challenges the view of women in the Zulu state as a homogenous group marked by universal subordination. For the most part, however, the Zulu past, in particular, has predominantly been written with an emphasis on masculine militarism that overrides and suppresses the political and militarised activities of certain women.

Zulu king Shaka ka Senzangakhona (*b.* 1787, *d.* 1828) has often been described as a great innovator and military strategist who built the Zulu state. For a long time the rise and persistence of the Zulu state was thought to be based on terror and repression by Shaka. Like many others before and after him, Methodist missionary William Holden believed that Shaka seized the leadership 'by treachery and violence' (Holden 1963: 56). Holden explained state building and war as motivated by the blood lust and ambition of Shaka, who he described as '“the Modern Attila”...“the Hyaena Man”...[and] “The Great Elephant”' (Holden 1963: 55). Theal described Shaka as 'one of the most ruthless conquerors the world has ever known', a man who was able to call up the Zulu's essential 'passion for blood' so that he could rise 'to tower in barbarian fame' (Theal

1964: 434). There were notable shifts in the 1960s when Africanist historians emphasised Shaka's astute leadership skills and challenged many of the previous negative assumptions of static African societies. In the late 1960s, revisionist scholars explored links between political and economic developments, and then in the late 1980s, Guy (1987) furthered our understanding by emphasising the importance of gender.

Long before nineteenth century traveller Adulphe Delegorgue published his claim that 'the government of the Zulus derives its form from the patriarchal' (Bird 1965, Vol. 1: 479), colonial officials – perhaps surprisingly – had noted that Zulu government, as distinct from Zulu society, was 'not patriarchal', although they failed to explore this further (*Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire Into the Past and Present State of the Kafirs in the District of Natal,...* 1853). Yet, in the 1960s, Gluckman claimed that even when women engaged in 'rituals of rebellion' they were actually demonstrating their abject subordination in daily life and that women could not become politically powerful, were suppressed in religion, and did not become ancestral shades (spirits) (Gluckman 1963: 115). Gluckman's claims of subordination are grounded in a perception of African pre-colonial systems as 'backward', and women as powerless. Ardener has pointed out that 'genuflections can give some people a misleading, oversimplified impression of low esteem for women which may obscure, for example, the respect they command as mothers, as royals, and in other capacities' (Ardener 1992: 4).

Much of our knowledge of the pre-colonial period comes from the writings of missionaries, and early nineteenth century travellers, but as Carol Christ points out, 'colonial thinkers perceived colonial cultures as feminine, thus justifying their conquest of them, while at the same time reinscribing the domination of masculine over feminine both at home and abroad' (Christ 2004: 77). In earlier work I have argued that far from being victims of male power, many women can be shown to be political agitators, exercising real power. Zulu royal women, for example, demonstrated such leadership before, during and after Shaka's reign and, in contrast to popularly held views, were not the subordinates of Shaka.<sup>1</sup> Women's leadership took a variety of forms, sometimes military, but more often economic and religious. Indeed, these roles defined their power. More than fulfilling social functions and providing labour, leadership by women was an intrinsic part of several pre-colonial systems in southern Africa.

This chapter is limited to exploring the roles and experiences of a collection of elite, chiefly, or 'royal' women who were part of the leadership structures and exercised power in a variety of ways. Not all women shared these experiences, and the experiences of the few elite women did not necessarily apply to women more generally. However, exploring the literature on more prominent women has suggested a re-examination of understanding of other women in, for example, military activity (explored later). While the chapter focuses predominantly on the Zulu because of available evidence, it is apparent that many of these chiefly activities were evident among other groups and the chapter also includes some examples of such women in other southern African groups.

The examples cited are not intended to suggest a universalism or ‘sameness’ across all of Africa, where all leadership structures are to some extent inclusive of women. The Zulu form an interesting study because they are so often presented as fiercely patriarchal and militaristic.

While many women leaders existed throughout Africa, historical evidence for some is fragmentary. For others, such as the Zulu for example, many records attest to their existence. The sources consulted for this chapter include official papers, published books, articles and theses. The *James Stuart Archive* and the writings of missionaries, early nineteenth century travellers, and contemporary anthropologists provide a wealth of information concerning the Zulu state and society in the pre-colonial period (Webb & Wright 1976, 1979, 1982, 1986, 2001). The *James Stuart Archive* (Volumes 1–5) is an extensive compilation of oral histories with statements from numerous informants. James Stuart, a colonial administrator, collected the testimonies between 1890 and 1920. Despite the richness of this resource, Wright points out that informants were:

almost all...male, with the great majority being African, ranging in age from less than 50 to over 90. Most of them were members of, or closely associated with, the chiefly families which had dominated rural communities in both Natal colony and the Zulu kingdom in the nineteenth century. (Wright 1995: 21)

Even so, they still provide much useful information on leading women.

## Chiefly women and cattle

Cattle had a central role in economic and ritual life among southern Africa’s pre-industrial farming societies, including the Zulu. In general, cattle husbandry was a male activity, and crop cultivation was women’s responsibility. However, some flexibility existed. Based on information from Henry Francis Fynn (nineteenth century traveller to Zululand), the Reverend Joseph Shooter writing in 1857 said that:

coast tribes in the Zulu-country were accustomed to this better practice; a Dwandwe man told me that his father worked in the garden during the reign of Dingane, and that old men among the Tetwas did it still. (Shooter 1969: 81)

Mpondo and Swazi men also cultivated (*Natal Government Gazette* 1853; Shooter 1969).

Guy argues that among the pre-colonial Zulu there existed a dominant class of married men and homestead heads, and a subordinate class of women and children, ‘the product of their labour being appropriated by their husbands and fathers’ (1987: 24). While Guy argues that women were not allowed to possess cattle, he qualifies this by acknowledging that there were possibly exceptions. These exceptions – including female religious figures – were noted in 1853 by the commissioners appointed to investigate the ‘past and present state’ of Africans in Natal. They cite the cases of exception as follows:

- 1st When the chieftainship is in the hands of a female.
- 2nd The elder female relations of a chief, by the permission of the chief.
- 3rd A female ‘Isanusi’, or witch doctor...that is one who is believed to hold intercourse with the spiritual world.
- 4th When a female, perhaps an only daughter, has received from her deceased relations the knowledge of any valuable medicinal plant, which is supposed to be retained in the family. (*Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire Into the Past and Present State of the Kafirs in the District of Natal,... 1853*)

French Protestant Huguenot Francois Coillard also noted this in 1897, suggesting that the Barotsi Mulena Mokwae (chief princess) owned cattle. Referring to cattle captured in the military campaign, he says ‘the king has reserved considerable flocks (as much for himself as for Mokwae and the principal members of his family), which he has scattered through the country’ (Coillard 1971: 312). Similarly, Thomas (1971) observed in 1872 that although Ndebele women rarely inherit cattle, there were exceptions. Clarke’s recent research advances this. She argues that Ndebele queens were owners of cattle:

MaKhumalo, King Mzilikazi’s daughter married to Sikhombo Mguni, annually received ten cattle from Lobhengula, which her daughters inherited. Queen Lozikeyi Dhlophlo had amassed a herd of 879 cattle by her death in 1919. The largest single bequest (of 130 beasts) was to her legal daughter Princess Sidambe. Sidambe’s daughter Pombo inherited 10 heifers and a bull when her father died, because Sidambe had brought 75 cattle as bridewealth to their marriage. (Clarke forthcoming)

While certain women in various southern African groups could own cattle, the accumulation of cattle allowed other economic advantages. Both men and women were involved in marriage exchange. Women (with wealth) could acquire wives of their own, and in so doing the labour, possibly the *lobola* (bride price), and the children of those wives. Such arrangements existed among rich or powerful women in various parts of Africa during the pre-colonial period.

Woman-to-woman ‘marriages’, women-‘marriages’, or ‘female husbands’ existed among the Lovedu, Venda, Zulu, Tonga, and possibly more. The use of the words ‘marriage’, ‘wife’ and ‘husband’, however, present a number of difficulties because of the western traditions, implications and relationships associated with such terms. The types of relationships and responsibilities described here, however, were non-sexual associations, with differing relationships and responsibilities. As Amadiume (1987) points out in relation to Nnobi women in Nigeria, women were able to form client/patron relationships, create labour forces and free themselves from domestic duties. In the absence of a more appropriate term for marriage at present, I will use inverted commas.

Robert Struthers, an ivory hunter in the Zulu and Tsonga regions between 1852 and 1865, noticed on his arrival at Milati's (the chief's mother) kraal that there were few men and that the inhabitants were mostly women – 'the Queen is their husband they say' (Struthers 1991: 74). Social anthropologist Eileen Krige determined from her extensive fieldwork among the Lovedu that headmen sent daughters to the queen 'for rain or personal or political favours and their reallocation by the queen to relatives or clients has made this institution a basic integrating factor in the political system' (Krige 1974: 16). She is thus both wife-receiver and wife-giver. A Lovedu woman chief may also inherit wives from her father (Krige 1974).

Woman-to-woman 'marriages' existed among the Zulu, according to Krige and Gluckman (Gluckman 1987; Krige 1974). Krige suggests that it was rare and likely that only diviners were able to acquire wives through their earnings. Stayt (1968) also notes possible expansion of such arrangements to non-chiefly women with the economic means among the Venda. In relation to the Zulu, Gluckman argues that:

as among the Nuer a rich Zulu woman can marry another woman by giving marriage-cattle for her, and she is the pater of her wife's children begotten by some male kinsmen of the female husband. They belong to the latter's agnatic lineage as if she were a man. (1987: 184)

Woman–woman 'marriages' among the Zulu, and Krige's point concerning the Lovedu, raise the possibility that not all women in the *isigodhlo* (the king's private enclosure consisting of the huts of his women and children) 'belonged' to kings such as Shaka. The accumulation of large numbers of women as wives or concubines is often seen as an indicator of male sexual dominance and patriarchy. It is well known that in southern Africa 'great men' would send their daughters to the king. Children of those killed in battle would also be sent to enlarge the *isigodhlo*. Mkando ka Dhlova, one of James Stuart's informants, said, 'the *isigodhlo* was an attribute of authority. They were treated with great respect' (Webb & Wright 1982: 151–2). Women were not always sent to a chief for sexual purposes. Rather, there is possibly a more complex political and economic base to such arrangements similar to that described by Amadiume. How the arrangements most often described as marriage differed between groups and changed over time requires more research.

It is possible that women were sent for the chiefly women. In the presence of chiefly woman–woman 'marriages', some of the *isigodhlo* women assumed by early European visitors to the region to 'belong' to kings may have rather been wives of royal women, alongside those of royal men. Such marriages, if noticed by colonial and church officials, would not have been officially recognised, and would have been opposed. Colonial missionary attitudes are demonstrated by the Norwegian missionary Schreuder who in 1847 wrote in relation to marriage that 'the customs of the Zulus show that they lie captive beneath the yoke of sin' (Hale 1997: 29). Woman–woman 'marriages', therefore,

are unlikely to have been recorded in any great detail, or recognised as legal marriages by Europeans, and may have been largely overlooked by early travellers to the regions. While evidence of woman–woman ‘marriage’ among the pre-colonial Zulu is scant, the existence of the practice in southern Africa is another indicator of the powerful positions certain women had, and suggests that a wider interpretation of inheritance is also necessary.

Guy’s argument that there existed a dominant class of married men and homestead heads, and a subordinate class of women and children, could perhaps be expanded to include the dominant class of elite women, some of whom also seemed to have had access to and control of ‘the product of their labour being appropriated by their husbands and fathers’ (Guy 1987: 24). This would seem to be a parallel class structure rather than a vertical class structure in the form of a pyramid with the king at the apex. Certain chiefly women in various southern African groups were exceptions in terms of ownership of cattle. Perhaps they constituted part of what Guy describes as the dominant class.

## Chiefly women

Rather than being peripheral in politics, many women were central figures in southern Africa.<sup>2</sup> These women held chiefly positions and demonstrated leadership in political, military, and ritual affairs. This separation into different spheres is rather artificial because, in reality, the leadership roles involved all these activities in one way or another.

Henri Junod wrote that women chiefs were not common among the Thongas, but that the ‘Ba-Pedi, or Transvaal Ba-Sutho’ had many. He noted Midambuze, daughter of Dambuze (a chief of an area of ‘Mabota country’), ‘who was still living in 1912’ (Junod 1927, Vol. 1: 416–17). Adam Kuper argues that while chiefly women were quite common among Sotho- and Venda-speaking peoples, the Lovedu stand out because the leadership was passed ‘from each female ruler to a daughter born to the queen herself or to one of her wives’ (1982: 59). Among the Venda women may have been chief or regents for a minor son. According to Stayt, Nyadenga (woman petty chief of the Phiphidi area) ‘has the full rights of a man and is only subordinate to the chief himself. Her position will be inherited by her eldest daughter’ (1968: 215).

Alpern (1998) cites examples of Fon women warriors of Dahomey (modern Benin) in West Africa beheading enemies, but there is much less evidence of such practices in southern Africa. Coillard (1971) pointed out that Barotsi kings governed with one of their female relatives. Far from the picture of the women softened by their closeness to nature, Mokwae has been described as ‘executioner’ in the beheading of the ‘prime minister’ Pakalita (Coillard 1971: 215). The Barotsi Mokwae sat in the *lekhothla*, taking part in state affairs and making judgements. Coillard tells us that:

She is saluted like the king with ‘*Tautona*’ [meaning lion] and ‘*Yo-sho*,’ the salutations reserved for royalty alone. People prostrate themselves before her, and nobody has the right to sit in her presence, not even her husband, the *Mokwe Tunga* (Son-in-law of the Nation), who is only a servant, and can be dismissed at her pleasure. (1971: 213–14)

Hilda Kuper describes a partnership between Swazi kings and their mothers as one of legal, economic and ritual balance where ‘he is *Inkosi* [king] and she is also *Inkosi*’ (Kuper 1947: 55).

Far from being suppressed in politics, Zulu royal women – such as Shaka’s father’s (Senzangakhona) senior sister, Mnkabayi; Mawa (sister of Senzangakhona); Langazana (wife of Senzangakhona); and Nandi (Shaka’s mother) – exerted considerable influence in affairs of the group. There has been quite a lot recorded about Mnkabayi (*d.* 1835), although she is often portrayed as either a puppet or ruthless and bloodthirsty in a similar way to Shaka (Bryant 1929; Fuze 1979; Lugg 1978). It is worth emphasising here again some of the points I have raised in previously published work related to Zulu chiefly women and in particular to Mnkabayi.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Hanretta’s claim that women’s leadership was new to the Zulu and that ‘the potential for both exploitation and the acquisition of power and prestige increased as women’s lives became integrated into the Zulu state’ (1998: 415), I argue that Mnkabayi was a powerful figure in her own right in the pre-Shakan period. There is much evidence to indicate that she was politically powerful long before Shaka came to rule. It also appears that she would have been a reasonably young woman of marriageable age at the time of chief Jama’s death. This casts doubt on claims that women’s political influence was associated with post-menopausal status, which supposedly meant they were ritually clean and in a position to operate as males (Bryant 1929).<sup>4</sup>

Mnkabayi’s leadership can be identified following the deaths of Shaka’s predecessors Jama and Senzangakhona, as well as Shaka’s own death (Bryant 1929; Fuze 1979; Webb & Wright 1976, 1982). She made some key political decisions. Just how involved Mnkabayi may have been in bringing about the leadership of Senzangakhona, Shaka and Dingane is not really known, but she certainly played a part. Andrew Smith, a British doctor and early traveller to Natal, noted her importance and authority when he visited Shaka’s successor, Dingane (*d.* 1840), in 1832 (Kirby 1955).

Several key women continued to exercise political influence during Mpande’s (*d.* 1872) kingship. However, the political significance and influence of key Zulu women in politics, ritual and religion seems to have declined following that period. Perhaps it was a combination of African and colonial factors, as the Zulu kings recruited outside assistance through a process that Guy terms the ‘accommodation of patriarchs’ (1997: np). As Guy has pointed out, Natal officials and chiefs colluded to curb women’s rights, power and influence. It is highly unlikely that colonial officials would have emphasised the political roles of women, although missionaries noted their ritual role. Henry Francis

Fynn, however, was acutely aware of the chiefly role of women. It is interesting to note that a woman named Uvunhlazi (she was one of Fynn's wives) led the *Inkumbi*. This was a group formed by Fynn and included 'at least thirty-two tribes, nearly all of which were inhabiting the Natal district before the Zulu wars...and numbers ninety-two kraals' (*Natal Government Gazette* 1853).

## Women's religious roles and ritual power

Zulu women were not suppressed in religion in the pre-colonial period. It was not unusual for women leaders in southern Africa to be powerful in ritual and religion. This took a variety of forms, including rainmaking, administering ritual medicine, and custodianship of sacred objects. In contrast to Gluckman's (1963) claims, women *did* also become ancestral shades (spirits). As with male chiefs, leadership was linked closely with religion.<sup>5</sup> These women chiefs held similar ritual importance as their male counterparts.

The Swazi queen is the custodian of the sacred objects of the nation (Kuper 1947). Langazana had the key role of caring for Zulu sacred relics such as the *inkatha*, the sacred symbol of the office of kingship (Bryant 1929). The most significant point is that ritually restricted or sacred knowledge is aligned with power, and certain women had such knowledge.

### God the father

The overarching patriarchy of biblical traditions shaped the colonial – predominantly male – interpretations of Zulu religion and this is especially evident in the interpretation and general acceptance of *uNkulunkulu* (great ancestor; often used to mean God) as male God. In particular, this perception has undermined the importance of women in the ideology of the Zulu state. The Christian tradition sees God as male, and male as ruler, which legitimates 'the political and social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society' (Christ 1992: 275). The perception of female dependence on males dominated western religion and culture and, therefore, significantly influenced perceptions of Zulu religion and power. Common phrases in western religion, for example, include 'God the father', 'the heavenly father' and 'our Lord'. As Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow point out, a feminist critique of biblical religion has resulted in a questioning of 'God language, exclusion of women in leadership and ritual, and teachings on marriage and family [that] were systematically related to the theological world view of the biblical faith' (Christ & Plaskow 1992: 4).

I have argued elsewhere that there was a multiplicity of *oNkulunkulu* in the pre-colonial period that did not necessarily apply only to males.<sup>6</sup> *UNkulunkulu* was not the same as the Christian God and, unlike Christian prayer to God, praised links with ancestors.

The Christian ideology of early travellers and missionary accounts of the pre-colonial Zulu (and related groups) obscured women's religious and leadership roles and they were represented as inferior. Yet, the graves and ancestors of Mnkabayi and Nqumbazi (Cetshwayo's mother), for example, were important in purification rituals. Linking ancestral shades to Mnkabayi was in many ways as important as linking to Shaka, Dingane and Senzangakhona (Webb & Wright 1982, 1986).

The graves and ancestors of women such as Mnkabayi and Nqumbazi were also important as a refuge for those sentenced to execution (Webb & Wright 1982, 1986). Ndukwana, James Stuart's informant, informed Stuart that, at the place where Mnkabayi was buried, 'people might find refuge [because] in the case of a king giving the order that any man was to be killed, and this man escaping into the king's graveyard, he would not be molested any further' (Webb & Wright 1986: 360). Another informant, Mpatshana ka Sodondo, recalled that at the site of Nqumbazi's ancestral spirit, the *izinxweleha* (one who has killed another in battle) 'were given medicine to suck from the fingers, and sprinkled with medicines to drive off evil' (Webb & Wright 1982: 304).

### **Death and mourning rituals**

The public profile, political and ritual status and influence of Shaka's mother, Nandi, who died in 1827, was demonstrated dramatically at the time of mourning. Nandi's mourning in particular seems to have staked out new dimensions in political terms. Much has been written about Nandi's death and mourning, but there is disagreement related to both events. An alternative view as to the meanings of the killings associated with her mourning is that the ceremonies, various sacrifices and taboos were related to her status in both the earthly and spiritual worlds because people have the same status in the spiritual world as in the earthly world (Webb & Wright 1982, 1986). It was not uncommon for kings or people of rank to be accompanied in death (Webb & Wright 1986).

Nandi's mourning involved rituals and procedures similar to those applied to a king, including particular ceremonies and moving of the kraal at the completion of the period of mourning. Her *ihambo* ceremony marking the end of the mourning period was exaggerated and involved an attack on the Mpondo rather than the more usual hunt (Bryant 1929; Krige 1965; Webb & Wright 1976, 1979). Shaka took Mnkabi, 'one of Senzangakona's greater *amakosikazi*', on this campaign (Webb & Wright 2001: 41). Krige (1965) claims that there was never an *ukubuyisa* (bring back, restore) ceremony for women. Yet Nandi's spirit appears to have been brought back to continue to watch over Shaka's welfare (Webb & Wright 1986). Nandi's mourning reflected the importance of Nandi herself. Mnkabi (a wife of Senzangakhona) was treated in death in a similar manner to a king. Ngidi, one of James Stuart's informants, says that when a king died it was said that the king was ill. The death would in effect be 'concealed' until some time after the event, and that Mnkabi's corpse was also treated in this way (Webb & Wright 2001). Women's chiefly status is also evident in other rituals such as the *umkhosi* or first fruits ceremony.

## The first fruits ceremony

The first fruits ceremony was held annually among many of the groups of the Natal region. It was as much a religious ritual (where the leader and the military were strengthened and celebrated through medicines and praising the ancestors) as a harvest ceremony. Among the Zulu, it was a national ceremony of great importance.

Krige (1965) describes ritual associated with preparations for the *umkhosi* as predominantly male focused. Yet in an earlier period, according to Fuze (1979), Nomantshali (a favourite wife of Mpande) once represented the king at the annual first fruits ceremony, something that had not been done before. ‘She came forward to represent him, dressed like a king [*inkosi, pl. amakhosi*] and carrying a small shield, to represent the Zulu nation’ (Fuze 1979: 105). Nomantshali was not alone in her leadership of the *umkhosi*. There is also evidence that Songiya (Mpande’s mother) played a part in the first fruits ceremony. Cetshwayo (Mpande’s son and successor) usually held the ceremony at Mpande’s capital, ‘doing so to demonstrate to the people that he was still Mpande himself, and that they had no cause for disunity’ (Fuze 1979: 105). However, Cetshwayo once held a first fruits ceremony at the place of his grandmother, Songiya. Clarke has found that the Ndebele queens – king Lobengula’s wife, Losekeyi, and his sister – also led the annual harvest ceremony known as the *Ncwala* ceremony (Clarke 2004). To what extent women’s leadership in the ritual expanded or contracted over time is not clear and requires further investigation. Male focused interpretations of national ceremonies such as these need to be re-examined to give greater attention to the influence of chiefly women.

## Women’s militarism

Rarely have militarism and femininity been conceptualised together. The depictions of women are usually as wife and mother. However, like other areas, military activity can take a variety of forms<sup>7</sup> and we do find examples of women involved in military leadership, spying, war purification rituals and combat.

Certain Zulu women held positions of influence in the *amakhanda* (Zulu military kraals) of the successive Zulu kings Shaka (1816–28), Dingane (1828–40) and Mpande (1840–72).<sup>8</sup> In pre-colonial southern Africa there are few examples of direct warrior or military activity by women. However, the evidence that is available suggests that women were not all ‘demonstrating their abject subordination in daily life’ (Gluckman 1963: 115). Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Scott (Bird 1965, Vol 1), James Stuart’s informants (Webb & Wright 1979, 1982, 1986) and Bryant (1929) all mention the female chief named Machibise. According to Bryant, Machibise led two Nqondo offshoots (*aba kwa Ngwane* and *emaHlavuleni*) and had her own *impi* (military unit, army) who gained a reputation as fierce warriors. When Chumu chief Macingwane attacked, ‘Macibise offered so stout

a resistance that Macingwane was obliged to give up the idea of capturing her cattle' (Webb & Wright 1979: 119; 1986: 3, 23). However, she and her people were not so successful with Shaka (Webb & Wright 2001), nor was she the only woman involved in such activities.

Tlokwa chief Sekonyela's mother, MaNthatisi (Mosayane) of the Tlokwa (*ca.* 1781–*ca.* 1836), 'the famous conqueror', was said to have had the first voice in his council as well as displaying a celebrated 'martial genius' and engaging in conflict (Bird 1965, Vol 1; Bryant 1929; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997; Ellenberger 1992).<sup>9</sup> She assumed the leadership around 1817, during the early Shakan wars. She quickly built her reputation and in 1817 her warriors attacked Ndwandwe chief Zwide. 'It was in consequence of the prestige gained in this expedition that a Hlubi chief called Motsholi came to seek shelter among them from the oppressions of Umtimkulu and Pakalita, the sons of Bongane [Hlubi chief]' (Ellenberger 1992: 45). Following these clashes, she led her people westward and fought Moshweshwe (Moshoeshoe, BaSotho king *b.* 1786 *d.* 1870) and his people.

MaMthunzini of the abaLumbi, who 'anciently occupied from the Umhloti, above Verulum, to the upper part of the Imona River' (Bird 1965, Vol 1: 129; Webb & Wright 1982: 54), also came into conflict with Shaka, and the Zulus dispersed her people. Matyatye (or Ssete), another chiefly woman, possibly clashed with chief of the Ndebele, Mzilikazi (Rasmussen 1978). While there may not be much direct evidence of women fighting, Ellenberger describes an interesting incident:

[Mantatisi] saw the enemy approaching, she gathered all the women together, and formed them in ranks in front of the camp, and in front of them she placed such males as were left in the camp. These, brandishing mats and hoes, presented when viewed from a distance, the appearance of a strong force of warriors, which gave pause to Pakalita, who hoped to find the camp defenceless, and caused him to halt and make fresh plan. (1992: 127)

Other military activity was less overt, such as the case of Zwide's sisters acting as spies by seducing Mthethwa chief Dingiswayo and, in so doing, secretly obtaining a significant and powerful personal substance (in this case semen), which was subsequently compounded into a medicine that Zwide was able to use to overcome his enemy (Bryant 1929; Webb & Wright 1979, 1986). According to Alpern (1998), the Fon women warriors of the kingdom of Dahomey, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, also acted in a similar way. Fon women were trained in combat from an early age, appear to have been symbolic wives of the king, and resided in royal palaces. European visitors to the region generally began to refer to them as 'amazons' in the late 1840s (Alpern 1998).

The military activity of Zulu women seems to also extend beyond Shaka's immediate relatives. Like men, girls were organised into regiments (*amabutho*) (Webb & Wright 2001). Fynn noted female regiments numbering eight to ten thousand on his first visit to Shaka's kraal (Fynn cited in Stuart & Malcolm 1969: 73). Zulu female regiments are usually mentioned in the literature in organisational terms or as something akin to age-

sets (age-based social units), rather than as active military groups similar to the male regiments. Yet, it seems that at least some of these female regiments were more than organisational age units. Although there is very little written about female *amabutho*, the information that is available suggests that they may very well have had a more significant and wider purpose than has previously been recognised.

Women certainly had a variety of roles, from mat carrying in times of war during the Shakan period (Webb & Wright 1982), and protecting the king, through to combat. Andrew Smith (Kirby 1955) wrote that Shaka had a female *ibutho* (regiment), which also had a female commander who cohabited with Shaka. It seems then that not all *induna* (those appointed to command) were male, and that an *induna* of a female *ibutho* could have been male or female (Webb & Wright 2001). One such *ibutho* was called the ‘English Regiment’, according to Smith, and the reference to this regiment is in the context of simulated fighting. Fynn refers to this group as uNkisimana, claiming that they were formed for Shaka’s amusement, although the evidence below indicates that this is very unlikely (Fynn cited in Stuart & Malcolm 1969). Stuart’s informant Mmemi ka Nguluzane claims that the name of this *ibutho* was not related to ‘English’, but rather was ‘the name of a troupe [sic] of girls of the *isigodhlo* at Dukuza’ (Webb & Wright 1982: 270).

James Stuart’s informants, Maziyana ka Mahlabeni and Ngidi ka Mcikaziswa, mention the involvement of women in the *ihambo* campaign against chief Faku’s (c1820–67) Mpondo (see above) (Webb & Wright 1979, 2001). Maziyana says that these female *amabutho* were the uNkisimana, umChekecheke and inTshuku. Ngidi adds that the Mvutwamini *ibutho* went with the Mpondo *impi* (Webb & Wright 2001). Lieutenant Francis Farewell said in 1828 that Shaka never led the army into combat, but stayed ‘five or six days in the rear’ (Leverton 1989: 12) rather than put himself at risk. This is the case with the *ihambo* campaign and it is not clear from Maziyana’s testimony whether the uNkisimana were located in the front, or the rear with Shaka. Ngidi refers to these groups as the ‘*ihambo* of Nandi *impi*’ (Webb & Wright 2001: 41). Maziyana does mention that there were ‘girls of the king’s *mdhlunkulu* [royal establishment]’ (Webb & Wright 1979: 274). Mpatshana indicates that a section of a female *ibutho* in the *isigodhlo* was armed:

In the afternoon near sunset they would be made to go and stand above the kraal (Ondini and oLandandhlovu) and fire at an *umhlabo* aloe. These girls were all supplied with short carbines...These girls were the king’s bodyguard, and went about with him from kraal to kraal. These girls, I never heard of their fighting.  
(Webb & Wright 1982: 328)

The umChekecheke were said by Mtshapi, James Stuart’s informant, to have carried big sticks (Webb & Wright 1986). Stuart’s informant Ngidi goes further, saying that ‘Tshaka used to go out to war with the *amakosikazi* as well as girls. They cut shields (*izihlangu*) and carried assegais, and had to fight when required to do so’ (Webb & Wright 2001: 41, 56, 69). According to Ngidi there were some who earned and wore the *iziqu* (medicine

worn by warriors who had killed in combat), which was evidence of having killed an opponent. They ‘fought like men’ (Webb & Wright 2001: 69). Ngidi says that in 1856 women fought with Mbuyazi at Ndondakusuka – the succession dispute battle between Cetshwayo and Mbuyazi. Shooter also describes an incident where Swazi girls with shields and assegais taunted Mpande’s Zulu warriors who were not able to capture their cattle. The girls were positioned on a precipice above the Zulus. This suggests that during Shaka and Mpande’s reigns (and possibly others) there may have been a class of women whose function was protection. This would make sense given the numbers of women, the symbolic celibacy of some, and the exclusion of men from the women’s area.

Celibacy of female warriors was not unusual in other parts of Africa.<sup>10</sup> It should also be noted that celibacy can take a number of different forms that are context specific and so may not necessarily equate to a total lack of sexual activity.

## **Male attempts to appropriate specifically female realms of power**

Several of Shaka’s female relatives were symbolically celibate and I have argued elsewhere that it was a symbol of particular status among ‘royal’ Zulu women that could be altered according to circumstances.<sup>11</sup> It was a key characteristic that separated these royal women from ‘ordinary’ people, and it is also likely that ‘celibacy’ was held as sacred, representing a special status. If a woman remained unmarried, she honoured only her own lineage ancestors who also became those honoured for the group over and above any others.

Symbolic celibacy also appears elsewhere. Clarke has shown that Ndebele women also exhibited celibacy. Clarke reports:

‘Barrenness was associated with the ceremonial role,’ I was told. When I asked why Queen Lozikeyi Dhlodhlo had borne no child, I was told: ‘In our tradition as Ngunis, if the first queen gets a baby, that means that all the traditional customs and ancestors will not have been consulted.’ Dhlodhlo family tradition states that childlessness was part of her marriage contract. Mahamba suggests that the reason was that Lozikeyi made war medicines. (2004: 4)

‘War doctors’ pounded and stirred up medicines, called on the ancestors of the king, and treated the army by sprinkling them with the substance that would aid them in battle.

Apart from separation from the common folk, symbolic celibacy of ‘royal’ women may have another religious dimension. Depletion of life-protecting chiefly religious power through the release of sexual energy could be potentially life-threatening to the community. Referring to the Nso (Cameroon), Ifeka notes that ‘the mystical dangers inherent in a queen mother’s unrestricted release of sexual energy’ could pose a threat for the polity (1992: 142). Among the Zulu, much ritual activity required ‘coolness’ and

sexual energy creates heat, thus abstaining from sexual relations is to remain ‘cool’. Perhaps chiefly ritual coolness is another politico-religious dimension to symbolic celibacy.

Shaka and Dingane were also celibate. This has often been attributed to Shaka’s personality or sexual preference. The conventional view is that Shaka and Dingane did not marry or have children, but had many concubines who were killed if they became pregnant. Gardiner observed that ‘neither Charka nor Dingarn ever allowed that they had children, and it would be instant death to any subject who would make such an assertion!’ (1966: 99). It is often claimed that Shaka wanted to avoid leadership challenges by heirs, and that it was a military strategy. Gluckman added that ‘Shaka was at least a latent homosexual and possibly psychotic’ (1960: 168), a perception that has been repeated in many texts such as *The Zulu Kings* by Roberts (1974) and, 20 years later, in *Shaka’s Children* by Taylor (1994). Morris (1973) even claimed Shaka was impotent, although applying the same argument to Dingane is problematic.

Both Shaka and Dingane seem to have appropriated the symbolic celibacy of significant women for the specific purpose of transferring to their own person the power of the women, and possibly to enhance their ritual status.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that Shaka and Dingane had Mpande raise children for them because, as leaders, they wished to be perceived as symbolically celibate.

According to Maclean (1854), unlike their immediate male ancestors, celibacy was part of an agreement between Shaka and Dingane that Shaka not produce any heirs. As has been stated earlier, certain women had chiefly roles. Co-operation between the king and the chiefly women would have been necessary. However, as the state grew, it is likely that the co-operation became more problematic. Under such circumstances, it became increasingly necessary for the king to focus power on himself.

Alongside symbolic celibacy, there is also an example of a second area where male leaders ‘became’ like women and that was menstruation. While menstruation rendered a person as ‘hot’ rather than ‘cool’ it was nonetheless symbolically very powerful. While menstruation has also been associated with pollution taboos, and thus removal of privileges, it also confers privileges. Two great military strategists, Shaka and his mentor, Dingiswayo, both appear to have mimicked the distinctly feminine attribute of menstruation. This argument was first presented in Weir (2000a). Despite having found a single reference to this, it is nonetheless powerful and will be quoted again here. ‘Dingiswayo and, after him, Shaka pretended to be afflicted with certain evacuations [menstruation] in the way that women are, though not at regular periods. On these occasions numerous cattle were slaughtered and many people killed’ (Fynn cited in Stuart & Malcolm 1969: 30).

Conception and birth have often been interpreted as sources of female power, which needs to be controlled. The onset of menstruation is also a ‘rite of passage’ – a change in status – and marked by ritual in many cultures, thus having a communal or public aspect to it rather than being something private. As Washbourn argues, ‘menstruation symbolizes the advent of a new power that is *mana* or “sacred.” A sacred power has life-giving and life-destroying possibilities, and in no case is *mana* to be taken lightly’ (1992:

251). Berglund's informants also highlight links with ancestral shades: 'They [shades] are in that place (the womb). They cause the blood to come regularly. It is their work' (1989: 117).

The attempt by Shaka and Dingiswayo before him represents a desire by both leaders to try to incorporate aspects of female power in order to lay claim to the rights of women. It has both a political and a ritual aspect to it. They had to balance carefully the political power of the women with their own at a time of rapid and significant change. At the same time, usurping women's influence and enhancing their own through means other than terror would have been vital to the consolidation of central power. Perhaps, for Shaka and Dingiswayo, menstruation was seen as something to be envied. A symbolic menstrual 'rite of passage' would demonstrate them transformed as mature leaders, not in a sexual or biological sense, but rather with all the responsibilities and ritual power that accompany both male and female leaders.

The contradiction and interaction between chiefly male and female masculinity and femininity is curious. La Fontaine points out that socially constructed concepts of personhood differ: 'What these variable concepts of the person have in common is that they relate physical attributes to social being; they differ in the manner in which they do this and, in particular, in their lack of recognition of the individual in the sense that we understand this in the West. Failure to take this into account has been a source of misrepresentation in Western anthropology and in the analysis of gender' (1992: 92-3, 103). La Fontaine argues that a person can represent a category while at the same time retaining another identity. The implications of this have been identified by Ngubane's (1977) study of the Zulu, where she argues that divination is a 'woman thing' and that if a man is 'called':

he becomes a transvestite, as he is playing the role of a daughter rather than that of a son. For the special and very close contact with the spirits is reserved in this society for women only – women who are thought of as marginal, and can thus fulfil the important social role of forming the bridge between the two worlds.  
(1977: 142)

## Conclusion

Chiefly women were not the subordinates of male dictators, as has been widely accepted in much of the literature on the history of groups such as the Zulu in southern Africa. It is quite clear that certain women possessed real political, economic and ritual power in the pre-colonial period. The wide-ranging roles that they occupied at various times does not indicate that such women assumed chiefly roles in the absence of suitable males or in lieu of men, or as surrogate men as has often been assumed. Women were not women lobbying to gain the rights of men.

While sex is biologically constructed (that is, male or female), gender roles are culturally constructed and also bound by context. In southern Africa in the pre-colonial period, there were multidimensional women and multidimensional men, both living and dead (in the form of ancestral shades).

Both men and women held chiefly roles. Both could lead in ritual and become *uNkulunkulu*. Women also played various military roles. The fluidity of ‘marriage’ arrangements, with chiefly women being able to marry both a man and a woman, challenges western gender perspectives. Finally, the possibility of chiefs such as Shaka taking on female attributes suggests a need for a reconceptualisation of aspects of pre-colonial Zulu patriarchy. The evidence presented in this chapter raises questions for many of the long-held assumptions of southern African patriarchy, most particularly among the Zulu who are often presented as the most patriarchal. It is highly likely that there were gross misunderstandings by the early observers and recorders in the region, and thus misrepresentations of the significance of women in political, military and ritual leadership. Much more research and analysis remains to be done.

#### NOTES

- 1 For a detailed discussion see Weir (2000a, 2000b).
- 2 For a detailed discussion see Weir (2000a, 2000b).
- 3 For a detailed explanation see Weir (2000a; 2000b: Chapter 7).
- 4 If she was born when Jama was 20, for example, she would have been around 34 years of age when he died, and Senzangakhona would have been around 24.
- 5 For a detailed explanation see Weir (2000b).
- 6 For a detailed explanation see Weir (2000b, 2005).
- 7 I am grateful to Raymond Suttner for alerting me to this aspect.
- 8 For a detailed explanation see Weir (2000b: Chapter 7).
- 9 Bryant has her as Mokotjo’s widow and Sekonyela’s mother, but Ellenberger says that Monyalue, MaNthatisi’s mother, bore a son in 1804 called Sekonyela which would make MaNthatisi Sekonyela’s sister (Bryant 1929; Ellenberger 1992).
- 10 Alpern (1998) points out that the women warriors in Dahomey were celibate, and lived apart in royal palaces.
- 11 Celibacy is defined in this chapter as the absence of formally recognised marriage or children while holding particular office or status. For a detailed discussion see Weir (2000a; 2000b: Chapter 7).
- 12 For a detailed discussion see Weir (2000a; 2000b: Chapter 7).

## REFERENCES

- Alpern S (1998) *Amazons of black Sparta: The women warriors of Dahomey*. London: Hurst.
- Amadiume I (1987) *Male daughters, female husbands*. London: Zed Books.
- Ardener S (1992) Persons and powers of women: An introduction. In S Ardener (ed) *Persons and powers of women in diverse cultures*. Oxford: Berg.
- Berglund A (1989) *Zulu thought-patterns and symbolism*. London: Hurst.
- Bird J (ed) (1965) *The Annals of Natal: 1495-1845* (vols 1 & 2). Cape Town: Struik. (Original work published 1888)
- Bryant A (1929) *Olden times in Zululand and Natal*. London: Longman.
- Christ C (1992) Why women need the goddess: Phenomenological, psychological, and political reflections. In C Christ & J Plaskow *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Christ C (2004) Whose history are we writing? Reading feminist texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 20(2): 59-82.
- Christ C & Plaskow J (Eds) (1992) *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Clarke M (2004) Women and power in the Ndebele empire. Paper presented at the Britain Zimbabwe society, Oxford (12-13 June).
- Clarke M (forthcoming) Women and power in the Ndebele Empire. In E Chipembere, G Mazirire & T Ranger (Eds) *What history for which Zimbabwe?* Harare: Weaver Press.
- Coillard F (1971) *On the threshold of Central Africa*. London: Frank Cass. (Original work published 1897)
- Coquery-Vidrovitch C (1997) *African women: A modern history*. B Raps (trans.). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Ellenberger E (1992) *History of the Basuto*. Morija: Morija Museum & Archives. (Original work published 1912)
- Fuze M (1979) *The black people and whence they came*. In AT Cope (ed) HC Lugg (trans.). Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Gardiner A (1966) *Narrative of a journey to the Zoolu country in South Africa*. Cape Town: Struik. (Original work published 1836)
- Gluckman M (1960) The rise of a Zulu empire. *Scientific American*, 202(4): 157-168.
- Gluckman M (1963) *Order and rebellion in tribal Africa*. London: Cohen and West.
- Gluckman M (1987) Kinship and marriage among the Lozi of Rhodesia and the Zulu of Natal. In AR Radcliffe-Brown & D Forde (Eds) *African systems of kinship and marriage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1950)
- Guy J (1987) Analysing pre-capitalist societies in southern Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14(1): 18-37.
- Guy J (1997) An accommodation of patriarchs: Theophilus Shepstone and the foundations of the system of Native Administration in Natal. Paper presented at the International Colloquium on Masculinities, University of Natal, Durban.
- Hale F (ed) (1997) *Norwegian missionaries in Natal and Zululand: Selected correspondence 1844-1900*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society.
- Hamilton C (1985) Ideology, oral traditions and the struggle for power in the early Zulu kingdom. MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Hanretta S (1998) Women, marginality and the Zulu state: Women's institutions and power in the early nineteenth century. *Journal of African History*, 39: 389-415.
- Holden W (1963) *History of the Colony of Natal*. Cape Town: Struik. (Original work published 1855)
- Ifeka C (1992) The mystical and political powers of queen mothers, kings and commoners in Nso, Cameroon. In S Ardener (ed) *Persons and powers of women in diverse cultures*. New York: Berg.
- Junod H (1927) *The life of a South African tribe* (vols 1 & 2). London: Macmillan.
- Kirby P (ed) (1955) *Andrew Smith and Natal: Documents relating to the early history of that province*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society.
- Krige E (1965) *The social system of the Zulus*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter. (Original work published 1936)
- Krige E (1974) Woman-marriage, with special reference to the Lovedu: Its significance for the definition of marriage. *Africa*, 44: 1.
- Kuper A (1982) *Wives for cattle*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kuper H (1947) *An African aristocracy*. London: Oxford University Press.
- La Fontaine J (1992) The persons of women. In S Ardener (ed) *Persons and powers of women in diverse cultures*. Oxford: Berg.
- Leverton B (ed) (1989) *Records of Natal, Volume Two September 1828-July 1835*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Lugg H (1978) *A guide to the Zulu social system*. Durban: University of Natal.
- Maclean C (1854) *Nautical Magazine*, January.
- Morris D (1973) *The washing of the spears*. London: Cardinal. (Original work published 1966)
- Natal Government Gazette* (1853) Supplement, 215, January 18, Evidence of Louis Grout. np.
- Ngubane H (1977) *Body and mind in Zulu medicine*. London: Academic Press.

- Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Past and Present State of the Kafirs in the District of Natal.*  
(1853) Natal Archives, File NCP 8/3/1, 6.
- Rasmussen R (1978) *Migrant kingdom*. London: Rex Collings.
- Roberts B (1974) *The Zulu kings*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Shooter J (1969) *The Kafirs of Natal and the Zulu country*. New York: Negro Universities Press. (Original work published 1857)
- Stayt H (1968) *The BaVenda*. London: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1931)
- Struthers R (1991) *Robert Briggs Struthers hunting journal: 1852–1856 in the Zulu kingdom and the Tsonga regions*. (Edited by P Merrett & R Butcher). Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Stuart J & Malcolm D McK (Eds) (1969) *The diary of Henry Francis Fynn*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter.
- Taylor S (1994) *Shaka's children*. London: HarperCollins.
- Theal G (1964) *History of South Africa*, 11 vols. Cape Town: Struik. (Original work published 1892-1919)
- Thomas T (1971) *Eleven years in Central Africa*. London: Cass. (Original work published 1872)
- Tyler J (1971) *Forty years among the Zulus*. Cape Town: Struik. (Original work published 1891)
- Washbourn P (1992) Becoming woman: Menstruation as spiritual experience. In CP Christ & J Plaskow (Eds) *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Webb C de B & Wright JB (Eds and trans) (1976–2001) *The James Stuart archive of oral evidence relating to the history of the Zulu and neighbouring peoples* (vol. 5). Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Weir J (2000a) 'I shall need to use her to rule': The power of 'royal' Zulu women in pre-colonial Zululand. *South African Historical Journal*, 43: 3-23.
- Weir J (2000b) Ideology and religion: The missing link in explanations for the rise and persistence of the Zulu state. PhD thesis, University of Western Australia.
- Weir J (2005) 'Whose UNkulunkulu'? *Africa*, 75(2): 203-219.
- Wright J (1995) Making the James Stuart Archive. Paper, African Studies Association, Florida.

# 'Like three tongues in one mouth': Tracing the elusive lives of slave women in (slavocratic) South Africa

PUMLA DINEO GQOLA

How can slaves be happy when they have the halter round their neck and whip upon their back? and are disgraced and thought of no more than beasts? – and are separated from their mothers, and husbands, and children, and sisters, just as cattle are sold and separated?...All slaves want to be free – to be free is very sweet. (Prince 1831: 22–3)

[I]t is often only in terms of their scarcity – or even their *absence* – that slave women have been accorded any historical recognition. (van der Spuy 1996: 3)

Writing about enslaved women in South Africa's past requires entering a site fraught with contradictions. It is a project haunted by historically contingent challenges that are in many ways different from those of many other societies shaped by enslavement. Unlike our colleagues in the Americas, South African historians and literary scholars lack the benefit of stacks of biographical narratives by men or women slaves.<sup>1</sup>



The sparse data that can be gleaned from court records and anecdotal evidence in other narratives also provides a mere glimpse into how enshackled people made sense of their enslavement, and their world more broadly.

On the other hand, there are volumes of written texts that tell us about how slaves were viewed by various settler communities. As Zine Magubane points out about slavocratic and colonial South Africa more broadly, there is a wealth of information on ‘the black image in the white mind...[n]o doubt...because that image played such a critical role in the making of the European self...We hear much less, however, about the white image in the black mind’ (Magubane 2004: 129, emphasis added). The underlying reasons stem from the relationship dominated people have to *erased* knowledge systems, so that the challenges that plague the project of writing enslaved women’s herstory, then, are linked to other histories and regimes of repression. It has sometimes been convenient to attribute this difficulty to the fact that the male-to-female slave ratio in Cape slavocratic society was 4:1, and to extrapolate from this that there is less to say about women slaves than about their male counterparts. Feminist and womanist scholars have rejected this out of hand (Abrahams 2000; Bradford 1995; van der Spuy 1996).

Bemoaning the near absence of women in broader South African colonial historiography, Helen Bradford calls enslaved women ‘barely visible’ (1995: 1), whereas Patricia van der Spuy (1996) goes on to problematise the conventional ways through which this absence has been explained. Most approaches to studying women slaves short-sightedly assume that they ‘were either significant in their absence, or in terms of their fertility, their contribution was profoundly negative’ (van der Spuy 1996: 44). Van der Spuy faults the focus on slave women’s ‘absence’ for its own sake, as much as she problematises the limited range of questions asked about slave women. Partly responsible for this ambiguous mention as absent/negative are explanations such as Robert Shell’s wet-nurse theory, widely recognised as the ‘nanny thesis’, which suggests that the location and functions to which enslaved women were put within the settler household had a negative impact on their fertility (and/or reproduction) and their relationships with male slaves, who were put to work differently. Van der Spuy proceeds to link the absence of slave women in historiography to the manner in which sexuality among slaves is made sense of.

Robert Shell speaks of slave women also becoming ‘in a literal sense the bosom of the settler family’ (1994: 304) and, although he says this as part of his flawed nanny thesis, I would argue that the validity of that observation leads to several questions about where to find information about, traces of, and influences from, enslaved women. Shell’s postulation precedes by over a decade VC Malherbe’s (2005) study on how sexuality and (il)legitimacy came to be inscribed in relation to slave women in the early nineteenth century. However, both suggest that traces of slave women may be found in sites which make sense of settler family histories beyond the western Cape. That the post-apartheid memory project has allowed the resurfacing of some slave traces in places as disparate as the Free State and the Karoo (Graaf Reinet, for example), might prove useful in this regard.

Malherbe's study reveals the politico-legal disharmony which characterised attempts to define and regulate slave women's sexuality. On the one hand, there were laws such as Article 8 of the Statutes of India of 1770, extended to the Cape two years later, which declared that the children of slaves and white masters could not be sold as slaves, and that such offspring had to be freed upon the biological father's death. On the other hand, there existed older anxieties about sexual contact across the enslaved/free divide and miscegenation so that:

[w]hile concubinage was forbidden, it was nevertheless rife in Cape Town. By 1678, sex with Company slaves and other *onchristen vrouen* (unchristian women) was considered so blatant and public an offence that the government issued a diatribe against *het schandelijke crime van fornicatie, ofte hoerendom* (the shocking crime of fornication, or whoredom) in which it pointed with regret to the many *onwettelijck geteelde* (illegally conceived) births. (Malherbe 2005: 166)

The complicated regulation of sexuality revealed that often the descriptions of what was true of slavocratic society were directly contradicted by other evidence. It was possible to have widespread exercise of the forbidden sexual and sexualised contact – where 'sexual' denotes consent and 'sexualised' flags violence enacted through sexual force – across the slave–master divide; the declaration that 'sex with Company slaves' was deemed offensive was not enough to curb its occurrence. Indeed, several other legal manoeuvres had to be effected to keep the threat presented by the children of such a 'shocking crime' at bay. Consequently, children of slave masters and slave women had no claims to the father's estate. It was also important for such children's births to be kept hidden, even if the children themselves obviously could not be wished away: slave women were allowed to give birth only in the Slave Lodge (used to house slaves) or in the homes of their owners.

There was equal anxiety about who would act as midwife during slave women's labour as there was about who assisted in the birthing process for white women. Such anxiety illuminates much about Shell's proposition, cited earlier, that slave women were the 'bosom of the settler family'. While '[a]mong private slave-owners, the roles of midwife, wet nurse and nanny would all be performed by a single slave woman', there was apprehension about acknowledging the centrality of such expertise to the survival of settler families and, therefore, communities (Malherbe 2005: 171). Slave work needed to be circumscribed, and slave skill reframed, as something other than what it was. Consequently, the Supreme Medical Committee declaration in 1807 was more than coincidence: 'except for "an aged woman", there was not one midwife professionally or legally instructed and sworn, any Hottentot woman, Free woman of Colour and even Slaves, presuming to act as midwives' (Malherbe 2005: 171). Representations of slave women within slavocratic South Africa relied on such conflicting declarations marking these women as the 'bosom of the settler family' at the same time as placing them under erasure.

Zine Magubane's groundbreaking study on how ideas about race, class and gender emerged, competed and crystallised in South Africa provides a particularly insightful lens on the contradictions touched on above. It is a reminder that ideas about women slaves need to be read against the emerging conceptualisation of labour between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Such a move should take into consideration the specific ideologies inscribed on all resistance to forced labour, and how such tattooing contributed to meanings about enslaved peoples. Magubane mines academic writing, newspapers, journals and other sites to reveal how Cape slaves and indigenous South Africans were often metaphorically (and otherwise) put to use in the crafting of ideas about productivity (mainly) in colonising Britain. Cape slaves and the Khoi/San more broadly were cast in the penultimate image of unproductive workers. Malherbe's (2005) study reveals similar approaches to notions of (il)legitimacy for Khoi/San people generally and all slaves at the Cape.<sup>2</sup> Magubane proceeds:

Hunter-gatherers, like the Khoikhoi and San, were particularly strongly associated with nomadic and unproductive movement, and, as a result...any ethnic group indigenous to South Africa eventually came to conjure up images of aimless mobility. (2004: 50)

Indeed, images of 'deliberately non-productive yet physically mobile' people, colonised or English, were undesired and therefore labelled vagrant, savage, etc., because of their resistance to capitalism (Magubane 2004: 50). Magubane has painstakingly shown how bodies of slaves and indigenous groups, especially in the larger Cape province, were used to justify usefulness codified as productivity.

Consequently, while slave labour was pervasive, Magubane demonstrates that the political discourse constitutive of capitalism labelled resisting and/or fleeing Khoi/San slaves as 'useless' and therefore unproductive. In a colonial and slavocratic context where production was conceptualised narrowly as that which pertained to manipulating the machinery of work, especially human labour, definitions of 'unproductive labour' included slavery at the Cape since productivity entailed market orientation (Magubane 2004). Consequently, in a very perverse reversal, slaves were deemed and labelled 'unproductive' and forms of resistance to this epistemic violence were used as support of their simultaneous exploitation and invisibilisation.

Magubane's work helps unearth how strategies through which slaves asserted agency were then corrupted and made to function as evidence of 'unproductive' and 'savage' behaviour. Such moves reduce successful resistance to slavery through flight into evidence of the innate inferiority of the Khoi/San and other slaves.

While the above are applicable to all slave communities, including the enslaved Khoi who were often disingenuously called other names, further discourses about women and biology circulating in Europe contributed to the specific erasure of slave women's agency and contribution to history. These discourses also worked to erase the fact of these women's enslavement in a variety of ways.

Slave women's labour was further circumscribed by circulating pseudo-scientific ideas about 'innate' feminine traits and their proximity to discipline, as:

[e]xperts in perennial discipline...claimed to have located the roots of female impulses and behavior, thus opening them up to exploitation and analysis by men. One of the relevant faculties for investigation in this regard was 'Philo-progenitiveness,' the main function of which was to produce 'the instinctive love of offspring in general.' Philoprogenitiveness, which 'chiefly supported the mother in her toils,' was found to be quite pronounced in 'Hindoos, Negroes, Esquimaux, Ceylonese, and Charib skulls'. (Magubane 2004: 90)

As emerging discourses around race, gender and capital congealed in support of the theorisation of 'philoprogenitiveness', slave women occupied a particularly precarious position. Given that the Dutch, and later the English, transported slaves from South (East) Asia ('Hindoos', 'Ceylonese'), East Africa and the southern African hinterland ('Negroes') – sites from which particularly 'philoprogenitive' skulls were found – slave women were at the very least doubly 'philoprogenitive', a factor which supported the presence of another contradiction in the location of slave women in the 'bosom of settler family': enslaved women who are forced to nurture the children of the slave owners but are denied the chance to mother their own children, an inheritance that continues to haunt South Africa nearly two centuries after the demise of colonial slavery.

Such appropriation and violent inscription, however, did not prevent the emergence of varied techniques of self-assertion, sometimes in the very sites designed to enshrine slave oppression. Enslaved women, like the manumitted slave and midwife Catharina van de Kaap, rose to prominence under trying conditions. Catharina continued to use her newfound prominence in the service of slave resistance, a facet of her life-choices which emerged quite clearly when she chose to assist Steyntje, another enslaved woman, in a court case that secured the latter's freedom as well as that of her children fathered by white male colonists.

Other slave women still would use loopholes in the legal machinery ushered in by Ordinance 19 of 1826, which established a Guardian of Slaves to investigate complaints, including, as in the past, 'carnal connexion' with masters. For example, on learning that she and her children had been advertised for sale, the slave woman Jaira pointed to their owner, Advocate van Ryneveld, as the children's father. By so doing, Jaira positioned van Ryneveld as a criminal, in breach of the unrepealed Article 8 of the Statutes of India of 1770 mentioned above. It made the looming sale of her children illegal and pointed to a man of the law as its hypocritical contravener. Such an act also allowed Jaira to claim the



Catharina van de Kaap

position of the aggrieved party for herself and her children, while contesting factors at the heart of slavocracy: the freedom of some to sell others at will and the pretence that the sexual exploitation of slave women by the masters was the practice of those faceless slave owners who were distant from the law. Instead, Jaira showed that such rapists could at the same time be highly esteemed, valued members of white Cape society.

The power behind Jaira's assertion was not lost on the Guardian of Slaves; it influenced him to label this 'a very delicate case' since the accused was a member 'of a most respectable family' and a married man (quoted in Malherbe 2005: 175). Although van Ryneveld accused Jaira of having earlier pointed to a slave man as the father of one of her children, the Guardian shelved the case in anticipation of further evidence, and Jaira and her children were not put up for sale.

In a similar case, the slave woman Leentje provided the court with indisputable evidence that her master had promised her freedom subject to her becoming his 'concubine' (Malherbe 2005). Leentje's evidence earned her freedom, and although her success was exceptional, it relied on the assertion of agency in the face of great odds.

These cases further illustrate the complicated terrain of slave women's sexuality, exploitation, reproduction and labour. As important as Shell's (1994) reminder is – in the tenth chapter of his *Children of Bondage* – that not all children between slave masters and slaves were the result of rape, the validity which womanist/feminist thinkers bequeath that rejoinder depends on our specific understanding of the spectrum of what counts as coercion. We cannot dismiss out of hand that consensual relationships were formed by enslaved women and free people, whether Black<sup>3</sup> or white. However, Shell's suggestion that this included slave women who sought favours by approximation to their *masters* is too easy. It requires that we imagine that slave women manipulated their masters in order to gain favour with them; that it was possible to exercise power in a direction opposite to how status was prescribed in slavocratic society. Equally troubling is Malherbe's gloss over rape and 'concubinage', even if the latter is the language of the legislation she analyses. Yvette Abrahams (1996, 2000) has luminously and extensively argued the complexities of 'free choice' in the lives of slave women at the Cape. While I will not attempt to rehash her arguments here, it is important to note that her work invites us to think about the specific manner in which the condition of enslavement was a denial of choice.

With this in mind, scholars are invited to continuously ask questions about the conceptual vocabulary and the impetus behind such reminders as propagated by Shell and subtly endorsed by Malherbe. These questions include probing what implications adhere to suggestions that slave women chose some of the conditions of their (sexual) exploitation. They necessitate a critical appraisal of the kinds of assumptions and research blind spots which accompany a stress on slave women manipulating slave owners for better treatment. Indeed, they demand that we confront, taking seriously the objectification (dehumanisation) that is at the heart of enslavement, what a consensual sexual relationship between a slave and her owner – human being and 'property' – might look like.

In his introduction to Mary Prince's (1831) Caribbean slave narrative, the British/South African poet and one time secretary of the Anti-Slavery Committee, Thomas Pringle, notes that the sale scenes and many other experiences recollected by Prince echo those Pringle has seen of Cape slavery. Pringle also makes several comparisons between Prince's abuses – the manner of her sale, the sexual abuses, the outright lies told about her by her slave masters – and similar situations he has witnessed in the Cape. Mary Prince asserts, in the quotation with which I started this chapter, that no slave enjoys her/his enslavement given the outright brutality of this experience – even in its 'mild' forms as apologists often argued about Caribbean and South African slavery.<sup>4</sup> It would appear a contradiction then for women slaves to willingly enter sexual relationships with those *directly responsible* for 'the halter round their neck...whip upon their back [who]...disgrace [slaves and think of them as] no more than beasts' and separate them from all loved ones. Prince's insistence on her right to speak on behalf of all enslaved people in her analysis of the conditions of enslavement is further buttressed by Pringle, who repeatedly points out that Prince's life experiences are not exceptional but mirror the lives of many West Indian and South African slaves.

In the face of accusations that she lied, which tended to follow slave testimonies, and especially slave women's testimonies the world over, Prince asserts the right to speak for all slaves. In Cape slave society, as in other slavocratic geographies, slave women's acts of defiance, through which they asserted their humanity, were not always met with the somewhat successful legal responses that Catharina's, Steyntje's, Jaira's and Leentje's cases, discussed above, received. Some were tragic in ways that have emerged as typical of experiences of enslavement worldwide. The ways in which these slave women have been written about in documents that survive from the time also serve to occlude more than they illuminate. It is telling that their encounters with the legal justice system are the only windows into their lives that scholars from later centuries have.

In scenes reminiscent of Toni Morrison's (1987a) novel *Beloved*, inspired by slave women killing their children in order to save them from a life of enslavement, Minerva, a Madagascan slave and Hester, born into Cape slavery, survive record as mere traces, so that although their presence is clear, the textures of their lives are nonetheless obscured. The accusation of madness against Minerva, who slit her children's throats, is said in her court records to have occurred 'when a quarrel with her mistress left her disturbed' (quoted in Malherbe 2005: 176). Such records are resonant of the 'inexplicability' levelled against similar actions by slave women throughout Cape and American slave societies. It follows Hester van die Kaap's decision in 1819 to drown her three children before attempting to drown herself. The emblematic status that such scenes and punishments have taken on due to their repetition in slave narratives from elsewhere speaks to the invisibility of slave women and men as human beings to those who objectified them. Both Hester and Minerva were tried and sentenced to death by strangulation.

It is not inexplicable that a slave woman might kill her children to save them from conditions of enslavement. At the same time, slavocratic societies relied on large numbers

of slave women giving birth to children who would also be slaves. Acts such as Hester's and Minerva's exist along the same continuum as those by Steyntje, Jaira and Leentje. They are very risky, and therefore courageous, attempts to grasp at freedom and to act with love and compassion towards their loved ones in the midst of an institution that claims they are not fully human and are therefore incapable of forming the meaningful bonds that are the entitlement of all people.

The ways in which sexuality was used as a tool of exploitation for slave women and men are not limited to the relationships of reproduction and child rearing, however. Slave women who were found to have sexually transmitted infections were also punished in the Slave Lodge or the House of Correction.

While it is sometimes possible to catch glimpses of specific slave women's lives, and to be able to name them, it goes without saying that the specificities of most slave women's lives are lost to us as distinct experiences. Many sites of slave women's agency will be part of the broader canvas of meanings and echoes that emerge out of enslavement, and these pertain to the terrain of language, religion, and other aspects. It is important to think about some of these as part of appreciating the contributions of slave women to South Africa.

## Shame, echoes and slave memory

In an essay that provoked much debate on slavery and South African identities, originally delivered as a keynote address at a conference in Cape Town and later published in a volume on post-apartheid South Africa, celebrated writer and cultural theorist Zoë Wicomb (1996, 1998) lamented the absence of any folk memory of slavery in the western Cape, where the bulk of enslaved people lived between 1658 and 1838, and where, she points out, the bulk of their descendants continue to live today. For Wicomb, this absence has less to do with individual enslaved subjects or the communities that they formed, and more to do with the ensuing regimes of terror which compounded the dehumanising experiences of slavery. The result is a collective psychic attempt to deal with these pasts, an attempt to forget shame.

The effect of this shame is forgetting, since it is the past, and awareness of this past, which inscribes these subjects with what is seen as shameful. Put differently, shame leads to a collective forgetting of a past which inscribes these subjects with a dehumanised status, a shamed location. Because shame attaches to conditions of humiliation, a past which foregrounds precisely the debasement of the ancestry of coloured people will engender shame. This shame is therefore a response to a series of degrading periods in the past. As Wicomb theorises it, it is a collective self-protection from the trauma of slavery and successful colonisation and dispossession. It is 'easier' than remembering the complex myriad of collective traumas which precede the present. Wicomb's shame is a relationship with the past which forecloses on a traumatic memory, and not an

inherent blood-based condition as propagated by white supremacist literature such as the (in)famous Sarah Getrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924).

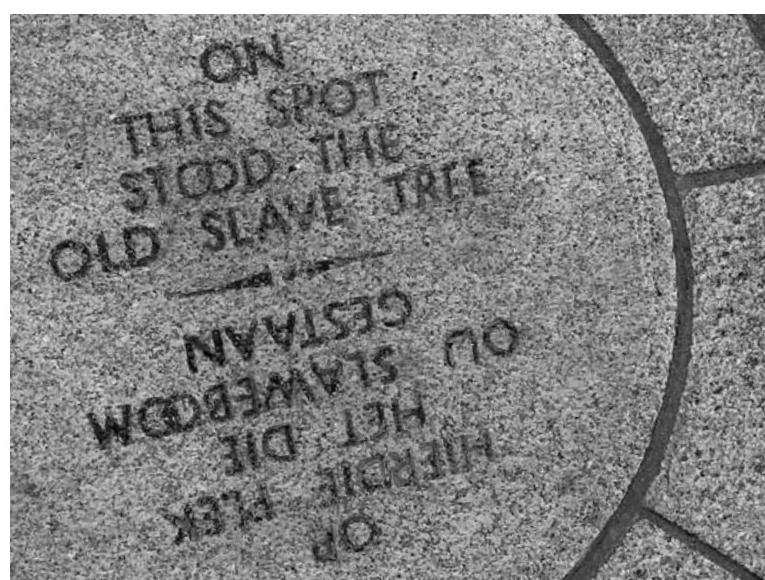
Some of the findings of Magubane's work, discussed above, can be marshalled in support of Wicomb's conception of shame. All forms of slavery, including Khoi 'indenture', objectified and terrorised the enslaved and therefore eventually lead to shame, but the discourses which conspired to inscribe slaves and their forms of resistance with unproductive savagery helped in the disavowal of slave memory. Further stereotypes as useless and/or happy/willing (Khoi) slaves retain an ugly imprint on the South African psyche (as was evident in the pronouncements on coloured people by Marike de Klerk, the last apartheid president's wife, and irresponsible initial explanations for the 'coloured vote' in the first democratic election).

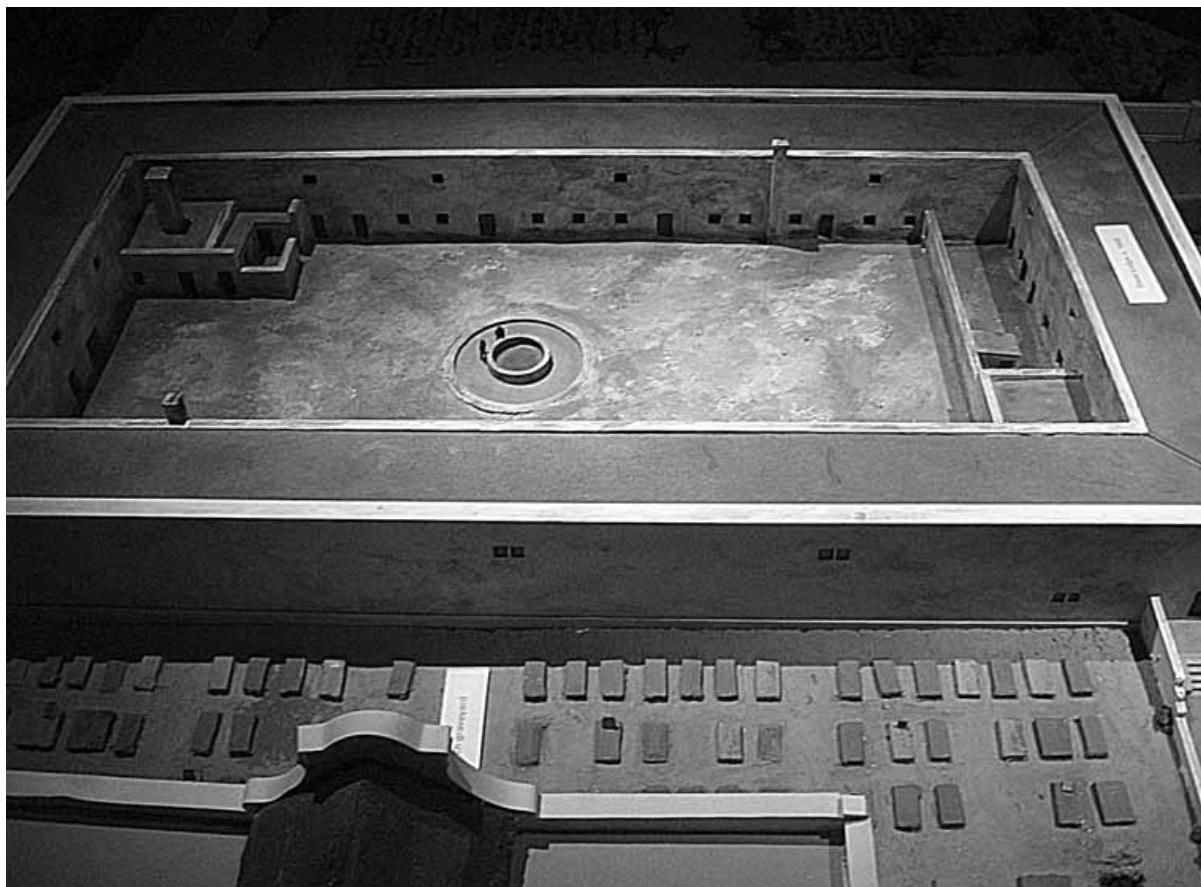
In that very perverse reversal of the meaning of labour discussed earlier, slaves are deemed and labelled ‘unproductive’ and forms of resistance to this epistemic violence used as support of their simultaneous exploitation and invisibilisation. Given the manner in which oppressive ideologies travel, however, it is this ‘truth’ – of the lazy, useless, sometimes willing slave, who makes no real contribution to society – that survives.

It is so pervasive that it feeds into the shame that Wicomb writes about in the descendants of slaves who are told they have nothing to show from a time of enslavement. Shame results from dehumanisation and the psychic memory of that debasement, but also because slaves' contributions to South Africa are denied and erased. Like all Blacks, colonial discourse continues, they were historically at the mercy – and therefore the beneficiaries – of European 'benevolence' and 'civilisation'.

Marike de Klerk was indexing this old discourse that nonetheless retains currency when she spoke of coloured people as leftover people. It is the same discourse that resonates in the racist colloquial declaration that coloured people have no culture, where culture is conceived of in static colonialist anthropological terms. It is reminiscent of enslavement because only animals are without culture; to be human is to be cultured. Enslavement is about denying humanity, culture and community.

In the same year as Wicomb (1996), another writer felt the need to draw attention to the fact that most people never noticed the steel plate on a traffic island in Steel Street in Cape Town. The plate marks the spot where the slave tree once stood. The unnoticed, albeit marked, spot, denotes the point of sale of slaves for 300 years. The writer, Mike Nicol, noted that, stranger still, ‘That’s it. No dates. No reason for remembering. No meaning. Just this strange need someone once had not to forget’ (*Mail & Guardian* 29.11.1996). This





A model of the Slave Lodge as originally built.

plaque in front of the South African Cultural Museum, as it was then known, used to be easy to miss. Perhaps it is less so now, and easier to be mindful of slavery's imprint now that the building has been renamed as the Slave Lodge, in accordance with its first name. The Slave Lodge is the second oldest building in Cape Town and was once used to house slaves. Although an imposing structure, and in proximity to the plaque 'nobody' read, under its colonial and apartheid name as the South African Cultural Museum, it masked the stamp of slavery on that city, and indeed on the entire country. Its location next to Parliament, surrounded by colonial monuments, is quite symbolic of the manner in which memory and official history work in relation to each other. There may be evidence of both, but memory's presence is less immediately evident.

Wicomb used other examples to support the evidence of shame in relation to slavery in South Africa. Many more could have been marshalled to the same end. However, as insightful as Wicomb's theorisation on shame is, more recent scholarship has demonstrated that slave memory is, in fact, everywhere.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Gabeba Baderoon subsequently observed, while some people in Cape Town knew that they were of slave descent, the particularities of this were unknown. It is only in 'recently intersecting with international dynamics about slave histories, reparation, slave routes' that these specifics could surface; it is possible, for example, 'that only then did many of the artists exhibiting at the renamed Slave Lodge museum themselves recognise the significance of their surnames being "January", or "Jacobs"' (pers. comm.<sup>6</sup>).

How is it possible, then, for evidence of slavery to be at once everywhere, as I argue above, and elusive enough for Wicomb to call it absent? Nkiru Nzegwu argues that this apparent contradiction is not uncommon when slavery is under consideration: as a matter of survival, historical consciousness of enslavement, and that informed by slavery, often takes the form of memory. Furthermore, slave memories, Nzegwu adds, 'have been carefully preserved in modes that do not easily give up the story' (2000: np).

While both official history (which is recorded and publicly circulated) and memory encompass, or are encompassed by, a consciousness of the past, memory is hidden since it is often at odds with certified and authorised knowledge regimes. This is a quandary that (from a Caribbean context) Maryse Condé has articulated as the difficulty Black people have with history, 'because a black person is not supposed to have a history except the colonial one' (Conde 1989: 23), hence Wicomb's shame in relation to slavery. Memory needs to resist erasure in order to survive the onslaught against its owners; yet it retains importance through the symbols through which each community invents itself. It requires a higher, more fraught level of activity in relation to the past than simply identifying and recording it.

The paucity of historical documentation on the lives of slave women as provided by traces of slave voices in court records, slave sales, and passing references, necessitates innovative ways of looking for slave women's presences in history and the present. This also means a more extensive engagement with these women than a mere focus on 'famous' slave women, as crucial a project as that is. How do we come to terms with the impact of slave women, to supplement the little we know about the much written about and overly-mythologised Krotoa and Sara Bartmann, or Catharina, Steyntje, Jaira and Leentje, discussed above?

Ramola Naidoo's powerful and provocative documentary on the lives of five slave women who acquired wealth once manumitted, *The Commander's Slaves: A Different Kind of Landed Gentry* (2000), is one such example. In it, Naidoo traces the lives of women such as Anna de Koningh and these women's families to reveal how some of them were absorbed into, and were therefore the grandmothers of, what became prominent Afrikaner families. These slave women's stories, alongside the better known one of how Krotoa's children were absorbed into Afrikaner society, among others, lend further credibility to the centrality of slave women to the historical constitution of Afrikaner society, another dimension to Shell's slave women as the 'bosom of settler society'.

Another approach is presented by womanist historian Yvette Abrahams (1996) in her provocative and ground-breaking essay 'Was Eva raped?' She suggests that the feminist/womanist historical investigator sometimes needs to adopt a speculative lens. To demonstrate, Abrahams works from the present backwards, using the tools of a



Anna de Koningh

feminist and womanist epistemology on post-traumatic syndrome to unlock meaning from traces of Krotoa's behaviour and known circumstances.

In order to avoid repeating the pitfalls of oppressive systems, it is necessary to think of historical presence through both individual slave women and the traces left behind by slave (women) communities. The African feminist/womanist imperative requires the examination of 'unconventional' locations in addition to combing the state/museum archives, newspaper archives, court records and other narratives which may not immediately appear to hold such contents. Such 'unconventional' locations can function as valuable sources of contestatory meanings and other significances that centre the lives of African/Asian women.

A feminist project that concentrates on making slave women more visible should pay attention to what is known, knowable, suggested about these lives: the influences, movements, echoes, ways through which they made meaning and were made meaning of, and other ways in which they shaped South Africa. Uncovering such, and other, information requires deviation from, and supplementing of, standard methodology on historical eras to uncover nuances missing from hegemonic representations.

In now turning to address such a task, I am mindful of the observations offered by Natasha Erlank and Lindsey Clowes about gender research into historical topics as that which 'understands historical trends and events as the results of contests between a multiplicity of socially constructed and competing identities on the level of the individual as well as the group' (2004: 231). Erlank and Clowes fittingly point out that a focus on women's agency in history requires us to be:

constantly aware of the micro-politics of their own time as well as of the past, for power is hidden in the interstices and minutiae of human relationships, and it is often difficult to identify the seemingly innocuous ways in which power is exercised to disadvantage particular groups along the lines of gender, race or sexuality. (2004: 232)

Paying close attention to the interstices of memory offers a way into such an investigation; one that traces the subtle ways in which slave women's subjectivities reverberate across eras. The remainder of this chapter grapples with some of the ways in which such a presence/contribution might be thought. In other words, it is an attempt to trace the elusive contributions of slave women to previous and contemporary epochs as well as to amplify the faint echoes of slave women in some sites of memory today.

## Amplifying the memories

Toni Morrison's (1987b, 1988) conceptualisation of slave memory roots in the wordplay with activity and reassemblage in her 're-memory' or 'memorying', where events and knowledge are 'memoried', 'memoryed', 're(-)membered', and 're-memoried'. This implies

a much wider field than simply (re/-/)collection and is itself a commentary on the (dis)junctures between memory and history, working as it does not only against forgetting but also disremembering. Here, the difference between forgetting and disremembering is the level of calculated erasure. Whereas both are inscribed by power hierarchies, disremembering is a more deliberate act of exclusion. It can be seen in appropriatory stances adopted by settler families in relation to slave labour, expertise, and other contributions, as discussed earlier. Thus, although Morrison's re-memory is fashioned with slavery in the Americas in mind, it offers a useful framework through which to think about the crevices of historical consciousness about slave women in the South African context.

Most thinking on memory focuses on precisely its refusal to remain distantly in the past and insists instead that it has an ever-presence which is mutable. The refusal to stay in one place suggests roaming qualities closer to a cyclical model. Even more beneficial to a visual imagination of memory is Dorothy L Pennington's conceptualisation. As far back as 1985 Pennington had suggested that memory is best thought of as a helix. She noted:

those whose egos extend into the past for a sense of completion emphasize the importance of the ancestors or those of the past who are believed to give meaning to one's present existence. This view may be likened to a helix in which, while there is a sense of movement, the helix at the same time, turns back upon itself and depends upon the past from which it springs to guide and determine its nature; *the past is an indispensable part of the present which participates in it, enlightens it, and gives it meaning.* (1985: 125, emphasis added)

To delve into slave memory terrain cannot simply be to trace how specific historical subjects acted in the past. Imani Kai Johnson eloquently traces the centrality of memory to the feminist/womanist theorisation of slavery. Since '[i]t goes without saying that the cultural lives of slaves are varied and complex' (Johnson 2001: 2), the examinations of the sites of that memory need to be particularly attentive to a variety of nuanced echoes. This perspective accompanies recognition of what people who were enslaved:

brought to these practices in spite of their subordinated social role. To put it simply, it is now understood in recent scholarship that there were cultural retentions from pre-slavery experiences that shaped and in part determined the cultural practices of slave communities. *Practices such as these were necessarily resistive within the context of slavery because they provided spaces within which slavery in one sense ceased.* (Johnson 2001: 2, emphasis added)

The 'spaces in which slavery in one sense ceased' were re-humanising and humanised spaces. Conceptualisations of memory in terms of Morrison's re-memory, Pennington's helix-like attributes, and Johnson's humanised spaces permit the conceptualisation of this process of representation in terms of the slipperiness with which the lives of the

disremembered can be imaginatively rendered. Such frameworks on memory stress the ongoing entanglements: remembering and forgetting always side by side. This is part of the cost of re-memory, because helix-like it changes the present as well as conceptualisation of the past. In addition, any movement of a helix causes structural change, so that it opens up an infinite number of possibilities. In this manner, the helix structure is a precise representation of Morrison's re-memory and works in specifically the same way. The relationship between the past and present in/of/with the helix is unstable in exactly the same manner as the archaeologically imaginative work of re-memory. Like the perpetual incompleteness of re-memory, the helix constantly changes planes and re-interrogates and reshapes itself. Both are in need of re-minding as well as reminding and are generative in different ways. They generate a reading of the shifting instability of the creative representation of slave memory, whilst being involved with linking different lineages in various conglomerations of past, present and future.

## Language and creolisation

The acknowledgement of creolisation is central to this process of uncovering slave (women) memory, as is the creolisation of cultural practices and of the Dutch language into Afrikaans by slave communities and their descendants. Processes of creolisation happen in proximity to and within different relations of power under conditions of slavery.

Mariam Chancy speaks of creolising language as a way of making the self visible and connecting with an ancestral tradition disrupted by enslavement:

[t]hese acts of language have been courageous, for alternative languages have long been used against oppressed peoples in order to denigrate their origins as well as their potential for self-empowerment through other avenues than those offered by various colonisers. (1997: 29)

Over the last decade, discussions on the role of Afrikaans in the project of nation building have brought slavery more centrally into the public awareness. Speaking to some of these issues, Franklin Sonn – educator and South African ambassador to Washington, DC – comments on the challenges of linguistic memory for coloured subjects given that they have a contradictory relationship with Afrikaans. This contradiction revolves around slavery which positions Afrikaans as part of creolised coloured history and experience, but not in the same manner as it is definitive for Afrikaners (Wyngaard 1999).

This history of both white and coloured positioning in relation to Afrikaans and Afrikaner identity stems from a past which shows that coloured people's foreparents (enslaved Africans and South Asians) creolised Dutch and turned it into an Africanised language, Afrikaans.<sup>7</sup> Such creolisation hinges here, as elsewhere, on the duality of creativity in/as survival, at the same time that it is a reminder of the trauma of

enslavement; in this regard it is slave memory space. While the creolisation of Dutch through its infusion with African, Asian and emerging inflections cannot be attributed solely to the efforts of slave women, it cannot be thought outside of their contributions. This is not only because one of the earliest labels for the language, prior to its appropriation and standardisation by Afrikaners in the service of a white supremacist masculinist project, was the derogatory '*kombuis taal*' ('kitchen language'). Gabeba Baderoon (2005) explores these contradictions in her poem 'My Tongue Softens on the Other Name', where the Afrikaans names for indigenous Western Cape plants (*kapokbos*, *witolyf*, *botterblom*, *speldekussing*, *ysplant*) are used as psychic navigation towards a home-space. Such names foreground the locational politics of languages made relevant, or creolised, for emerging contexts. They offer a glimpse into spaces where Johnson's re-humanising happens, symbolised here by Baderoon's speaker's softening of the tongue on the specific Afrikaans name, an effect that is not achieved with the naming of the same in English.

## Ambiguous visibility

In her doctoral thesis, Gabeba Baderoon (2004) coined the term 'ambiguous visibility' to describe and theorise the relationship between slavery and the contemporary imagination, especially in relation to Islam in the Capetonian context. She argues that whereas slavery's overt presence has been masked and denied, erased and delegated to the unacknowledged in much South African historical narrative, those aspects which could not be erased retain a haunting presence. For comfortable use in the dominant culture, slave traces were/are subsumed under the guise of the picturesque and exoticised. Consequently, hypervisibility worked to inscribe those slave sites linked with Muslim slaves as 'colourful', 'exotic' and 'harmless' in order to discursively mask their subversive meanings. Although Baderoon does not discuss Afrikaans in this manner in her study, the parallels with its treatment are clear when one considers the conventional descriptions of Capetonian Afrikaans as 'quaint', 'funny', or 'colourful' and its qualification as 'obviously' different from that dialect which became standardised in its ascent to domination.

The lessons from her in-depth study point to the limitations of speaking about South African slave memory exclusively in terms of visibility and non-/in/visibility. Not all visibility is enabling; some simply reduces those in view to the realm of the spectacle. Her work suggests that whereas erased, or buried, slave sites invite rediscovery and acknowledgement, those relegated to the spectacle necessitate new ways of engagement, 'to read familiar texts from an unexpected perspective' (Baderoon 2004: 30).

It should be common knowledge that:

[t]he men and women who planted Islam in South Africa were the labourers, exiles, *bandieten* [convicts], and slaves of the Dutch East India Company (VOC)

brought to the Cape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries...At the Cape as elsewhere in the VOC's possessions, the statutes of Batavia allowed the private – never public – practice of Islam, while prohibiting proselytising. (Mason 2002: 8)

The connections between slavery and Islam in the Western Cape are obvious. What is more, although no public writing exists from the earliest Muslims, the first Afrikaans texts were written in Arabic script by later generations of Muslims at the Cape.

My doctoral research (2004) in the field of knowledge tropes which stem from slavocratic South Africa, and how they retain resonance in the contemporary imagination, and Gabeba Baderoon's (2004) own doctoral study, have uncovered the fact that enormous knowledge systems about women making the world in bygone eras lie in 'women's spaces' such as published and unpublished Malay cookbooks. I have also shown how Islam functioned as a 'home-space' akin to the 'spaces within which slavery in one sense ceased', as theorised by Johnson above. In the slavocratic Cape, Islam (the religion of the enslaved) was opposed to Christianity (the religion of the slave owners, whose membership was heavily policed). It is only Islam that allowed the slaves to be fully spiritual beings inside an institutionalised religion. For slaves, Islam offered entry into recognition of their humanity with all the ensuing associations. While religion can be said to function quite centrally to various societies' self-definition and constitution, Islam at the Cape took on an additional series of significances. Particularly for Malay and East African slaves, transported from Muslim locations, it was a direct connection to pre-slave pasts. Islam functioned to support the slaves' link not only to the homes from which they were wrenched – in South (East) Asia and other parts of the African world – but also to one another; to older senses of community as well as to newer associations with other slaves from different geographical origins, but shared religion. It offered the enslaved a connection to an identity prior to capture and exile: a home. It presented the converts with a worldwide family in the *Umma(t)*.<sup>8</sup>

Alongside my argument about the home-spaces that Islam offered, Baderoon (2001, 2002) has shown that the relationship between Islam and Malay cooking can further enhance our feminist attempts to amplify echoes of slave agency. She demonstrated how cooking spaces, and the transmission and protection of knowledge, also worked to code much epistemic presence. In addition to the positioning of Malay cuisine as the site of some of the finest Muslim imaginative expression in South Africa, Baderoon (2002) also shows that Malay cooking is an alternative archive because cookbooks in Capetonian Muslim society (or Cape Malay society) work to encode carefully guarded meanings transmitted through women of various generations since the time of slavery. Consequently, although Malay cuisine is inscribed with hypervisibility, it also functions as a site of protected knowledge and memory passed down between intimate women. Baderoon further holds interviews with Capetonian Muslim cooks and transmitters of this tradition – who function as travellers in and protectors of these sites – of localised

and protected knowledge, to show how (selected) published Malay cookbooks and protected unpublished ones are depositories of knowledge, or archives, at the same time that she illustrates the limitations of the conventional archive for understanding historic knowledge creation.

The traditions of Malay cookbooks – as well as the heavily debated value of the various published versions – within which some things are nonetheless withheld, are traditions started by enslaved women centuries ago, and maintained within the community even though public communal cooking is often the preserve of Capetonian Muslim men. Baderoon reads these alternative archives, or memory-spaces, to show that ‘instead of being exotic, Muslim food, with its local ingredients blended with other elements, is one of the ways in which Islam became indigenised in South Africa’ (2004: 80), and explores some political meanings which link with subversive spaces traced all the way back to slavery.

At the same time, Baderoon skilfully shows how marginal Malay figures are used to construct the picturesque in colonial South Africa as a ‘disavowal of the brutalities of slavery’ (2004: 43), as her work amplifies traces of Muslim agency in sites which are usually framed to generalise about Muslims and Islam in South Africa.

Here, Baderoon demonstrates that archives are sometimes stored in ‘the stubborn memories of people’, and these require attention to ‘little used and alternative archives’ which offer us ‘a different response by the less powerful to the imperatives of archive, of strategies to elude the imperative toward cataloguing and classifying represented by the archive’ (2004: 31).

Contemporary research suggests the need for an ongoing reconfiguration of what counts as the archive when exploring meanings associated with slavery in songs and other sites which flow from this period of enslavement.

## Conclusion

Far from there being too little to examine and say about slave women because they formed a minority among the slave population of slavocratic South Africa, this chapter has shown that information about slave women exists in a variety of sites and forms. I have also tried to demonstrate the need for a multi-pronged approach to tracing/amplifying slave women presences. A feminist/womanist project charged with unearthing the memory, traditions and other traces of slaves generally, and slave women specifically, cannot adopt a single focus.

While it would have served an African/postcolonial<sup>9</sup> feminist historiographical narrative well to be able to reveal how enslaved women such as Catharina, Steyntje, Jaira, Krotoa, Sara, Leentje, Minerva and Hester saw themselves and interpreted their daily realities, historical records do not hold such nuances. Instead, the openings into their lives are offered through court records during which their agency is manifest

through contestation. Slave women were not wholly defined by the conditions of their enslavement, and yet it is scarcely possible to grasp some of the textures and peculiarities that threaded themselves through their lives.

At the same time, to imagine that women's contributions to their, and our, world lie only in eurandrocentric linear narratives is to privilege a particularly conservative perspective of historical narrative. It is a view that permits the uncovering of only certain kinds of historiographical evidence, and it privileges individual contributions to the exclusion of collective meaning-making processes which characterise all historical epochs.

The delegation of recognisable slave traces to court archives made their knowledge the exclusive domain of academics with the time, permission and resources to unearth them. The renaming of those sites which would bear testimony to our slave past served to erase this historical juncture. In this way, the sites of slavery were disremembered. The appropriation of much information gleaned from enslaved women who shaped Afrikaner and English families further served to mask the epistemic trajectories within which slave women were located.

It continues to be important to trace and amplify those narratives of survival, of victory, and other agency demonstrated by slave women under the most vicious system. Against this onslaught, slave women nonetheless exercised their agency in a number of ways. While the colonial and slavocratic ideologies continued to inscribe them with notions of unproductivity, Khoi/San slaves continued to resist and to flee, among a range of forms of subversions and resistance. More work is required to uncover further sites of slave memory, although thinking through present articulations against these long histories has proved fruitful. Such work mines memory and reconfigures the archive.

It remains important to use well-shaped feminist/womanist critical tools to uncover a myriad of stories of survival, subversion, resistance, violation, innovation and other modes by slave women. Additionally, a focus on individual women slaves needs to be supplemented with deliberate efforts to amplify traces of communal traditions, experiences and knowledge systems as part of humanising those who were enslaved. Humanising slaves is crucial since, as David Dabydeen notes, seeing slaves 'as primitive, sub-human creature[s] was necessary to the whole business of slavery since it avoided/made easy any problems of morality: Christians were not enslaving human beings, for blacks were not fully human' (1985: 29).

A concern with those 'spaces within which slavery in one sense ceased', as Johnson suggests, is an African feminist/womanist decision to remain mindful that 'power is hidden in the interstices and minutiae of human relationships', as Erlank and Clowes (2004) remind us. Beyond assisting us in understanding the socio-political dimensions of localised epistemic violence, although this is important too, such a redefinition of the archive permits us to interrogate the *notion* of the archive as depository of valuable knowledge, at the same time that it illuminates the limitations of the conventional archive for a nuanced understanding of historic knowledge creation and dissemination about slave women in South Africa.

In equal measure, such a move also necessitates that we engage in feminist/womanist rethinking of how we decode and analyse those meanings that can be gleaned from conventional historiographical sites; that we pay attention to what Ann Stoler has referred to as the ‘granularity’ of the archive (2002: 92) to better achieve what Hall has called an ‘archaeology of absences’ (1992: 3), in our attempt to ensure that our African feminist/womanist attempts to amplify the echoes and traces of slave women’s agency do not collude with systems that lead to ambiguous visibility. Instead, in recognition of the complexity of their lives, we must also learn to be sensitive to the cadences of three languages in one mouth,<sup>10</sup> even if we accept that we can never achieve full fluency and completion in them.

## NOTES

- 1 Nigel Worden reports that a colloquium to mark a centenary of History teaching at the University of Cape Town embraced the suggestion to ‘no longer confine ourselves to the study of “slavery”, with all the problems of definition (legal or social practice?) and boundaries, but rather extend the focus to varieties of forms of unfree labour’ (Worden 2004: 238). The benefits of such an approach when considering the various names under which slave labour was classified in slavocratic South Africa are clear, as are those to be gleaned for comparative exploitative labour (such as indenture) within South Africa. However, I find it more useful to employ the terminology of slavery and enslavement since ‘forced labour’ is vague. The slaves I discuss within the context of the Cape (province) are those captured and sold in/from South (East) Asia, East Africa and the Khoi.
- 2 Those deemed illegitimate were largely enslaved or indigenous people who had been denied access to Christianity, which was the only way to legitimacy in this regard.
- 3 Throughout this chapter, I use ‘Black’ to refer to the legal definition of Black in South Africa, which is the historical legacy of the Black Consciousness Movement. In its capitalised forms it refers to, according to the Constitution of the South African Students Organisation, the founding body of the Movement, ‘all those who have been historically discriminated against socially, economically and politically because of the colour of their skin’, in other words ‘Black’ here includes ‘African/black’, ‘coloured’ and ‘Indian’. This history is a strong rejection of the label ‘non-white’ as an insult. In terms of the racial classification in South Africa, this means Black refers to all those (previously) classified as coloured, Indian and African. I use the lower case black to mean that group (usually) designated ‘African’ and historically seen as not ‘of mixed-race descent’. This is not a reification of these categories, but a strategic decision in order to be able to discuss the differences within Blackness. I have not altered the writing of ‘b/Black’ in quotations.
- 4 This is a widespread defence of South African and Caribbean enslavement. Compare with Ephraim Peabody, who argues that slavery is a ‘great institution’ even though he bemoans the ‘necessary evils of this mournful institution...there is nowhere a more settled and bitter detestation of slavery than is sometimes met in the South’ where, nonetheless, ‘[t]he blacks of the South are no longer such as their fathers when brought from the shores of Africa. They have ceased to be savages’ (1849: 61–93).
- 5 Zimitri Erasmus’s (2001a, 2001b) thinking on contemporary coloured identity patterns reveals these to be directly impacted on, and shaped by, conditions of enslavement. The creolisation central to coloured identities, in Erasmus’s conceptualisation, is mnemonic activity. In a very different vein, Denis Constant Martin’s work on die Tweede Nuwe Jaar (the Second New Year) parades in Cape Town has also analysed this as evidence of a slave memory similar to other carnivals in geographic and psychic sites shaped by histories of enslavement. See, for example, Martin (2000). More recently, two doctoral theses have shown the memory of slavery in South Africa to be both everywhere and repressed. Gabeba Baderoon (2004) and Pumla Dineo Gqola (2004) have both demonstrated how the hidden traces and mere echoes of historical consciousness of slavery are precisely what make it memory (rather than history).
- 6 Personal communication, 20 June 2003.
- 7 ‘wat van Nederlands ‘n Afrika taal gemaak het deur dit te begin praat soos wat dit maklik op die tong geväl het’ in the original (Wyngaard 1999: np).
- 8 The *Ummat-al-Islam* is the common Muslim religious community globally.
- 9 For an in-depth discussion of African/postcolonial feminisms, see Gqola (2001), as well as other essays in the *Agenda African Feminisms Series* and several of the review essays on African feminisms on the Gender and Women’s Studies for Africa’s Transformation database, archived at <<http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/index.html>>.
- 10 David Dabydeen used the phrase ‘Like having three tongues in one mouth’ to refer to the necessity for enslaved people to learn to use several languages in different variations. Personal communication, 4 November 1998.

## REFERENCES

- Abrahams Y (1996) Was Eva raped? An exercise in speculative history. *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 23: 3–21.
- Abrahams Y (2000) Colonialism, dysjuncture and dysfunction: Sarah Baartman's resistance. PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.
- Baderoon G (2001) Art and Islam in South Africa: A reflection. *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa*, December.
- Baderoon G (2002) Everybody's mother was a good cook: Meanings of food in Muslim cooking. *Agenda*, 51: 4–15.
- Baderoon G (2004) Oblique figures: Representations of Islam in South African media and culture. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.
- Baderoon G (2005) *The dream in the next body*. Cape Town: Kwela.
- Bradford H (1995) Women, gender and colonialism: Rethinking the history of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones, c1806–1870. Paper presented at the Africa Seminar, CAS, 16 August.
- Chancy MJA (1997) *Searching for safe spaces: Afro-Caribbean women writers in exile*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Condé M (1989) Interview (with Edouard Glissant). In E Glissant (ed) *Caribbean discourse*. Caraf Series. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Dabydeen D (1985) Eighteenth century English literature on commerce and slavery. In D Dabydeen (ed) *The black presence in English literature*. Manchester/New Hampshire: Manchester University Press.
- Erasmus Z (2001a) Introduction: Re-imagining coloured identities in post-apartheid South Africa. *Coloured by history, shaped by place: New perspectives on coloured identities in Cape Town*. Cape Town: Kwela & South African History Online.
- Erasmus Z (2001b) Recognition through pleasure, recognition through violence: Gendered coloured subjectivities in South Africa. *Current Sociology*, 48(3): 71–86.
- Erlank N & Clowes L (2004) Writing and teaching gendered history in Africa in the twenty-first century. *South African Historical Journal*, 50, May: 231–236.
- Gqola PD (2001) *Ufanele uqavile*: Black women, feminisms and postcoloniality in Africa. *Agenda*, 50: 11–22.
- Gqola PD (2004) Shackled memories and elusive discourses? Colonial slavery and the contemporary cultural and artistic imagination in South Africa. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Munich, Germany.
- Hall M (1992) People in a changing urban landscape: Excavating Cape Town. Inaugural lecture, University of Cape Town, 25 March.
- Johnson IK (2001) Ritual of memory, ritual of performance: The function of ritual in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight robber* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the widow*. Paper presented at the 5th Congress of the Americas, Panel on Orality and Performance in Women's Art, New York University, October.
- Magubane Z (2004) *Bringing the empire home: Race, class and gender in Britain and Colonial South Africa*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Malherbe VC (2005) *In onegt verwekt*: Law, custom and illegitimacy in Cape Town, 1800–1840. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31(1), March: 163–185.
- Martin DC (2000) Cape Town's coon carnival, a site for the confrontation of competing coloured identities. In S Nuttal & C Michael (Eds) *Senses of culture, South African culture studies*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Mason JE (2002) A faith for ourselves: Slavery, surfism, and conversion to Islam at the Cape. *South African Historical Journal*, 46, May: 3–24.
- Millin SG (1924) *God's stepchildren*. Johannesburg: AD Donker.
- Morrison T (1987a) *Beloved*. New York: Plume.
- Morrison T (1987b) The site of memory. In W Zinsser (ed) *Inventing the truth: The art and craft of memoir*. Boston: Houghton.
- Morrison T (1988) Living memory. *City Limits*, 31 Mar.–7 April: 10–11.
- Naidoo R (2000) *The commander's slaves: A different kind of landed gentry*. SABC 3, 20 October.
- Nzegwu N (2000) Creating memory: A conversation with Carole Harris, a Detroit-based quilt artist. *Ijele: eArt Journal of the African World*, 1(1). Available at <<http://www.ijele.com/ijele/vol1.1/nzegwu2.html>>
- Peabody E (1849) Narratives of fugitive slaves. *Christian Examiner*, 47, July–September: 61–93.
- Pennington DL (1985) Time in African culture. In MK Asante & KW Asante (Eds) *African culture: The rhythms of unity*. Westport/Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press.
- Prince M (1831) *The history of Mary Prince, a West Indian slave: Related by herself: With a supplement by the editor: To which is added, the narrative of Asa-Asa, a captured African*. London: F Westley & AH Davis.
- Shell R (1994) *Children of bondage: A social history of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.
- Stoler AL (2002) Colonial archives and the arts of governance: On the content in the form. In C Hamilton, V Harrison & G Reid (Eds) *Refiguring the archive*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

- Van der Spuy P (1996) 'What, then, was the sexual outlet for black males?' A feminist critique of quantitative representations of women slaves at the Cape of Good Hope in the eighteenth century. *Kronos*, 23: 43–56.
- Wicomb Z (1996) Postcoloniality and postmodernity: The case of the coloured in South Africa. In H Wittenberg & L Nas (Eds) *AUETSA 96: Proceedings of the Conference of Association of University English Teachers of South Africa*. Bellville: University of the Western Cape.
- Wicomb Z (1998) Shame and identity: The case of the coloured in South Africa. In D Attridge & R Jolly (Eds) *Writing South Africa: Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970–1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Worden N (2004) Writing and teaching the history of unfree labour in Africa and the Indian Ocean in the twenty-first century. *South African Historical Journal*, 50, May: 236–240.
- Wyngaard H (1999) Maak Afrikaans 'n inklusiewe taal (Interview with Franklin Sonn). *Stigting vir Afrikaans*. Available at <<http://www.afrikaans.com/av542.html>> Accessed on 13 September 2000.

# Not a Nongqawuse story:

## An anti-heroine in historical perspective

HELEN BRADFORD

A teenager is particularly well known in South Africa. One of the greatest anti-colonial movements was called after her. As the millennium approached, she was the only woman whom the current president mentioned by name, as a democratic Constitution was adopted. Her imprint on oral, visual and literary culture is deep – and the heritage industry deems her a godsend. On what does her notoriety rest?

*Hayi uNongqawuse  
Intombi kaMhlakaza  
Wasibulala isizwe sethu*

*Yaxelela abantu yathi kubo bonke  
Bayu kuvuka abantu basemangcwabeni  
Bazisa uvuyo kunye ubutyebi  
Kanti uthetha ubuxoki* (Peires 2003: 21)

O Nongqawuse  
Maiden of Scatterer  
She killed our nation

She told the people she said to them all  
Buried people will arise  
Bringing joy together with wealth  
Yet she tells lies

A woman, then, apparently outstripped most men in her destructive powers. She allegedly killed a nation of some 150 000 people, calling themselves amaXhosa, on Africa's southeast coast. Since she did so as a fatherless peasant – and as a member of the sex forming 'so large a proportion of the poor in this patrilineal, male-dominated society' – she has almost no counterparts, worldwide (Iliffe 1992: 72).

The dominant explanation as to how she became one of the most destructive women in all history runs something like this (Gqoba 1888; Ngcofe-Masabalala 1997; Radebe 1990; Sandi 1986; Scheub 1996; Vilikazi 1965; Yalimanisi 1980): once there was a golden age among amaXhosa: rain fell, crops flourished, everyone ate beef. There was so much food that cats curled up with mice. Money, trade and poverty were absent. Ancient hierarchies sustained the nation: girls respected boys, women respected men, men respected *iinkosi* (lords, chiefs.)

Then a maiden entered this Eden. Men, she said, had arrived: men who had died, and were now rejuvenated. They, together with infinite supplies of everything desirable, were in an underground cavern, and had asked her to broadcast their message. If people destroyed their cattle, if they ceased cultivating, if they threw their stored grain to the winds, then an even better world would be born. Departed men would become visible to all, as an invincible army, led by Sifuba-sibanzi, the Broad-Chested One. White oppressors would be eliminated. Paradise would emerge, in which all were immortal, enjoying boundless prosperity.

AmaXhosa, mourn narrators, swallowed her lies. They destroyed their Eden. They gathered for the Great Day, when the sun would set in the east. '*[K]uza kudiban' izulu nomhlaba*' ('heaven and earth will meet together') promised the maiden (Radebe 1990: 95). But no one witnessed the sun turning its back on the west. No one attained heaven on earth. Instead, whites ruthlessly dispossessed famine-stricken survivors. They imprisoned or shot leaders, appropriated millions of acres, hustled starving people into cheap labour – and watched as tens of thousands died. A nation disintegrated. The movement was given the maiden's name. An idiom emerged: '*Uteta u-Nongqause*' – those recounting wondrous tales would be told: you are telling a Nongqawuse story. Deemed responsible for destroying a patriarchal pre-colonial order, she attracted much negative commentary.

*Ulizothe Nongqawuse ulizothe,  
Ulinyala Nongqawuse ulinyala,  
Ungumbulali Nongqawuse ungumbulali,  
Ungumkhohlisi Nongqawuse ungumkhohlisi...  
Tyhini! Baphela ubutyebi ngenxa kaNongqawuse,  
Vuthululu ubukhosи ngenxa kaNongqawuse,  
Laphela ulonwabo ngenxa kaNongqawuse,  
Yaphela intlutha ngenxa kaNongqawuse,  
Waphalala umzi ngenxa kaNongqawuse –  
Nde-e vovololo-o! Nde-e folokohlo-o!!!* (Sandi 1986: 27)

You are nauseating Nongqawuse you are nauseating,  
 You are indecent Nongqawuse you are indecent,  
 You are a murderer Nongqawuse you are a murderer,  
 You are a deceiver Nongqawuse you are a deceiver...  
 Hey! Wealth disappeared because of Nongqawuse,  
 Chieftaincy shattered because of Nongqawuse,  
 Pleasure disappeared because of Nongqawuse,  
 Abundant food disappeared because of Nongqawuse,  
 The nation spilt out because of Nongqawuse –  
*Nde-e vovololo-o!* I collap-se like one stab-bed!!!

Nongqawuse was also anathema to white men manning the colonial state. She and Nonkosi, another female seer, were among the leaders captured. In 1858, both were dumped in the ‘‘Female Kaffer Prison’’ in Cape Town, capital of the British Cape Colony (Bradford 2004: 73).

• • •

Nongqawuse, as the image on this page suggests, was not the only visionary. Millenarian movements, which anticipate heaven on earth, to be attained through superhuman means, have occurred worldwide. They have thrown up many similar seers. In southern Africa, as hundreds of thousands of peasants travelled towards a perfect world, a millennium, on a seven-year journey between 1850 and 1857, some 20 visionaries shepherded them along this route. Nongqawuse herself operated alongside a dozen other people near her homestead. Vision was her domain; many other organisational tasks existed; oratory fell into the province of her uncle, Mhlakaza (Scatterer). The most important words were issued by the ruler of the Xhosa nation: Rhili kaHintsa commanded everyone to cease cultivation, kill cattle and destroy *ubuthi* (poison, weapons of sorcery), in preparation for the black army.



Nongqawuse (on the right) and Nonkosi, photographed as political prisoners.

Somewhat oddly, influential actors other than Nongqawuse largely faded from memory. Although she was only active for nine months, as the movement climaxed, she soaked up narrative energy. Her contemporaries often spoke of her in praise poetry. This sophisticated genre, monopolised by men, was organised around discrete segments, providing pithy summaries of the past. Nongqawuse – a name rarely used, since poets preferred metaphors – was repeatedly accused of having given birth, in monstrous ways.

Some connected her to abortion or miscarriage. The famous historian-poet, Samuel Mqhayi, blazoned her name in the newspaper he sub-edited, insinuating an abortion (Rubusana 1911). Other forms of non-human birth appealed to traditionalist bards. One, terming himself a hard-headed man, hostile to cattle-killing in the name of fantasies, described her as:

*Intw' eyamitwá iminyak' emibini,  
Ukuz' izalwe seyinamazinyo.*

*Nal' irámncwa livele kulo-Tise engcotyeni* (Rubusana 1911: 382)

The thing impregnated for two years,  
So that the begotten already has teeth.  
Here is the wild beast, it appeared among Rhili's people in the reed grass.

Another deployed even more devastating images:

*Ngu qongqotwán' ezala, uxam ehlomkisa, incúk' ijwatulya.  
Ndifik' oxam befukamisana...  
Nyakana yatshat' intonjane ka xam* (Rubusana 1911: 379)

She's the dung beetle giving birth, the leguaan that swells, the hyena leaking milk.  
I arrived as leguaans were secluding the breast-feeding mother...  
The year that the leguaan's daughter was initiated through marriage, throwing a spear into the cattle kraal.

Contemporary poets had numerous reasons for linking Nongqawuse to monstrous birth. But whatever their individual motives, a broader point can be made: female fertility was a masculine concern. Patriarchal ‘appropriation of the productive and reproductive capacity of women was central to the structures of southern Africa’s precapitalist societies. It was the social feature on which society was based’ (Guy 1990: 40). In Xhosaland, patriarchs arranged women’s marriages, which required cattle, the prime masculine resource. A bridegroom’s menfolk would place some ten cattle in a bride’s natal home, to gain rights over her womb. Once married, she was expected to give birth to some eight to ten children: men’s children, the children of those who had paid cattle. Were she to produce no offspring, she could be returned to her natal home, and the cattle regained. Were she to die in childbirth, cattle were also reclaimable. Her life-giving powers were commoditised: patriarchs exchanged them against cattle, expecting a refund were she to prove unsatisfactory. Men who had lost their cattle, without gaining a world reborn, thus had good reason to attach a particular insult to Nongqawuse: monstrous birth.

Wombs, however, became less central to manhood as southern African peasants were conquered, dispossessed, extruded into a colonial order. Instead, female life-giving powers were often deemed burdensome. Women were increasingly valued not for their fertility, but for their sexuality. This historic shift was reflected in representations of Nongqawuse, as tropes linked to birth faded into the background.

Commentary about a century after the events was more westernised in form and content, paying greater attention to her appearance. There was, however, no consensus as to whether she had been swollen-breasted like a cow, or flat-chested and frigid (Jolobe 1959; Mutwa 1966). A leading Thembu bard, asked in 1970 if he could produce a poem about the events, provided some insight into popular opinions. His poem was composed after 22 seconds' reflection, suggesting that he drew upon common knowledge:

*Kulo mhla ke lehl' inyala,  
 Kuba yem' intombi kaMhlakaza,  
 Iba ngakuvela phezu komlambo,  
 Ibuy' ingxak' iyiphethe ngomlomo,  
 Ibikel' amadoda.  
 Int' ezingazanga zeva ngedikazi.  
 Yayilishobo kwaloo nto,  
 Ukuqalekiswa kwesizwe sikaXhosa,  
 Kusuk' umntw' ebhinqile  
 Ath' uthethile namanyange...  
 Nalishoba kuloo nzwakazi,  
 Intomb' emabele made:  
 Kuloko loo min' ayezizibhungu,  
 Kub' intombi yayiqal' ukuz' ebuntombini.  
 Yathi kanti noko kunjalo  
 Ishoba lokubulal' umzi kaPhal' ungenatyala  
 Liya kungena ngayo (Yalimanisi 1980: 108, 110)*

On this day, then, indecency descended,  
 For the maiden of Scatterer stood up,  
 She even appeared on the river bank,  
 She returned carrying the problem in her mouth,  
 She reported to men.

Those who have never been told what to do by a promiscuous woman.  
 That in itself was an omen,  
 A curse upon the nation of Xhosa,  
 A female gets up  
 Saying she spoke with the ancestors...  
 There is an omen in that handsome woman,  
 The maiden with pendulous breasts:  
 Except that on that day they were large and protuberant,

Because a marriageable maiden had begun to emerge from maidenhood.  
And yet even if it were so  
The omen killing the innocent nation of Phalo  
Will enter through her.

By the 1970s, a further twist had developed. Whether this sexualised woman had possessed a mind of her own had long been debatable. She had parroted the words of a lover, drawn from black enemies, declared some contemporaries. A century later, as the full weight of the apartheid state bore down upon peasants, a new racial dynamic was ascribed. It became common knowledge that Nongqawuse had been manipulated by a white man: the British Governor. A sexualised relationship was easily insinuated. As a 1970s' song ran:

Sir George Grey took our country  
He entered in through Nongqawuse  
The cattle died, the sheep died  
The power of the black people was finished off. (Peires 1990: 51)

As the apartheid order ended and a new millennium arrived, another theme began emerging. Time was passing, but Nongqawuse was becoming younger. She was slipping into the ranks of pre-pubescent girls, for whom neither fertility nor sexuality was a seemly topic of discussion. According to the author of the sole scholarly book about her and the movement, only one first-hand description of her exists: two English sentences, in colonial archives, generated by a black male spy, suggesting that she was mentally disturbed, dishevelled, and about 16. The author adds his own conclusions: she was an *intombazana* (a little pre-pubescent girl). This contributed to her tendency to be scatter-brained. But her 'fantastic promise of the resurrection [that] lured an entire people to death' was plausible precisely because she was an 'undefiled child' (Peires 2003: 11, 375). Similarly, a recent novel describes her as a disorientated waif (Mda 2000). In a play, 'The Prophet', female sexuality was so insignificant that the 'sick little girl' was played by a hunchbacked male dwarf (Bailey 2003: 159).

In all, representations of a well-known pre-colonial woman are overwhelmingly negative, but significant change has occurred over time. The focus has shifted from fertility, to sexuality, to childishness. These changes have depended less on new material being uncovered (historical research is largely conspicuous by its absence), than on broad social transformations.

Change, however, has not affected one feature: comments almost invariably pivot around Nongqawuse's sex. Rare is discussion suggesting she may have been poor. Discussion of her anti-imperialist politics is sparse. Above all, little interest is shown in the context of this daughter of war, who joined a mass movement six years after it originated, and operated amid a phalanx of other seers, in a region under overwhelming threat of war and colonisation. Instead, most narratives have focused on ahistorical biological attributes, and gendered characteristics conventionally assigned to the subordinate sex (silliness, deceit, and so forth). Many accounts would be drained of impact if the lead

character were to resemble Nongqawuse in all respects but one: the seer were male, like the leading actors of the 1850–57 era. Asked to explain Nongqawuse's visions, late twentieth century Xhosa men summarised consensus lasting some 150 years: 'she was a *b[h]inqa*, a female, and that was the sort of behaviour one expected from a *b[h]inqa*' (Peires 2003: 196). Overall, the corpus of accounts surrounding Nongqawuse is a treasure trove for those interested in sexist modes of analysis and misogynist invective.

• • •

## Remaking the past

Women often approach malestream wisdom with some reservations. On first encountering the Nongqawuse story, I was perturbed by representations of the anti-heroine. Could gender bias not be countered and neglected variables injected? Did the cattle plague, which scholars deemed the prime cause of millenarianism, not have gendered implications? Could research not illuminate whether Nongqawuse were a child, a maiden or a pregnant woman?

I tried following this route (Bradford 1996). But I became increasingly aware that I was inserting a revised image into a problematic framework: one constructed by those who had created the original disturbing portrait. Just as Africanist history cannot breathe within racist paradigms, so feminist history is stifled within frameworks created for non-feminist purposes. Adding women to extant paradigms, as scholars have repeatedly noted, is a flawed project; much broader issues need to be addressed.

A key limitation of the conventional Nongqawuse story is the narrow time span into which it is crammed. Since a teenager structures the period deemed relevant, this extends backwards, at best, to her childhood, then pivots around the nine months when she was active. Deep-rooted crises and preceding visionaries are of little interest. Yet only if she is positioned within a long line of influential seers grappling with comparable problems – and who began making similar prophecies decades before she was born – is she comprehensible. I departed, therefore, from periodisation revolving around an anti-heroine, and sought a much longer historical perspective.

Gendered blind spots constitute a second major problem. In standard accounts, we are directed towards fanciful female visions and an emasculating cattle epidemic – yet what of hyper-masculine arenas? What, in particular, of war? Throughout the time that Nongqawuse was active, the masculinist colonial state was preparing for violence. Virtually unnoticed in almost all accounts, warships, British regiments, and German mercenaries were pouring in. War threats were being made by officials on war-alert. Death of the land (*imfazwe*, war) meant that armed white men would attempt to eradicate homesteads from the face of the earth: burn homes, uproot crops, loot stock. Visionaries, consequently, had resonance when warning against planting crops that soldiers would destroy, or when urging self-consumption of resources that armed men

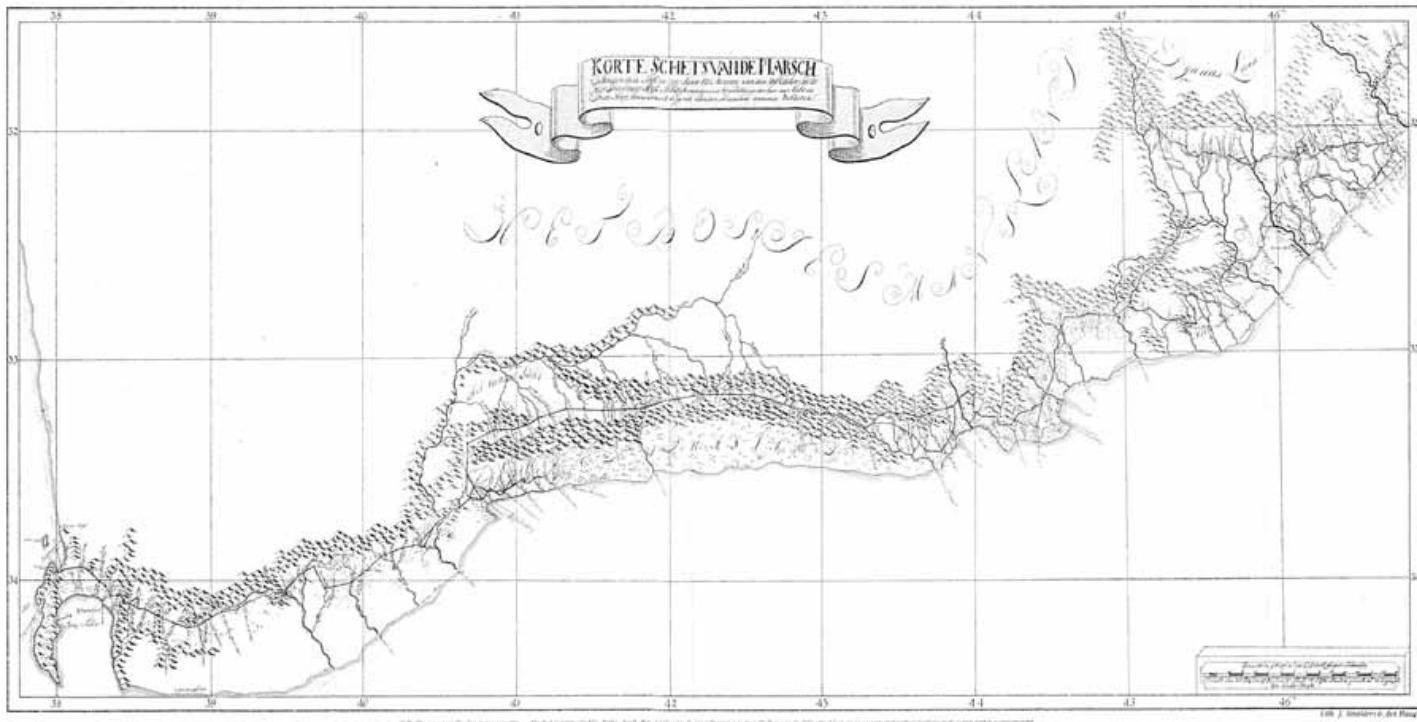
would steal. They also electrified audiences – who were surrounded by destitute defeated men – when proclaiming the arrival of an invincible black army. Accounts of a woman ‘luring’ a nation to death with fantastic promises are misleading when they fail to tell of a hyper-masculine colonial army preparing for scorched earth warfare, and fail to analyse the equally hyper-masculine black army which had arrived from over the sea. I became increasingly perturbed by the neglect of these competing masculinities. This is at odds with what has been argued of millenarian movements in general: at their ‘very heart’ stands ‘the new man’, and new ways of ‘defining the criteria by which the content of manhood is to measured’ (Burridge 1969: 11).

Marginalisation of the voices of those most intimately connected to this movement constitutes a third problem. Vernacular sources, emanating from Nongqawuse’s black contemporaries, abound; they are of little interest in either popular or scholarly accounts. Praise poems discussing monstrous birth have thus fallen by the wayside, in favour of westernised gender stereotypes. Relevant sources, according to professional historians, derive overwhelmingly from people like themselves: educated white men speaking English. Two newspaper articles constitute ‘our only Xhosa-language primary source’ on Nongqawuse’s movement (Peires 2003: 387). If someone were ‘semi-literate, his letters are of little value as historical sources’ (Stapleton 1994: 229). I found, on the contrary, that numerous people more familiar with orality than literacy offered crucial insights; that Xhosa-language primary sources overflow and are extraordinarily rich; that nineteenth century historians writing in isiXhosa are more informative than many a modern scholar.

Vernacular voices, violent masculinities, a longer historical perspective: these were key in my attempts to construct a different framework. But I was pursuing a lonely and back-breaking path. There is a price to be paid for dissent from popular consensus: that activities should revolve around exhumation of a female corpse, which can then be exhibited, in varying attire, as exemplifying the evils of the *bhinqa*. I stumble as I walk away from this tourist attraction. I lose my way as I depart from a westernised highway. I remain baffled by many features of an anti-imperialist movement of the illiterate poor, who bequeathed few explanations for actions which were almost the last that many performed on this earth. I know only that I cannot breathe within the extant corpus of gender- and western-biased work.

What follows, then, is not a Nongqawuse story. It is but my attempt to indicate the value of a longer historical perspective, within a gendered paradigm, paying particular attention to themes and sources marginalised within orthodoxy. I have constructed it under the influence of an indigenous historical genre – praise poetry, which possesses discrete layers from which central themes gradually emerge – as well as visual sources, which evoke the domain of visionaries. Such aids, I found, were helpful, as I journeyed towards the time when a woman appeared on the coast, saying that men who constituted the heart’s desire had arrived, led by the Broad-Chested One.

• • •



This 1752 map depicts the route of an expedition from Cape Town to Thembuland.

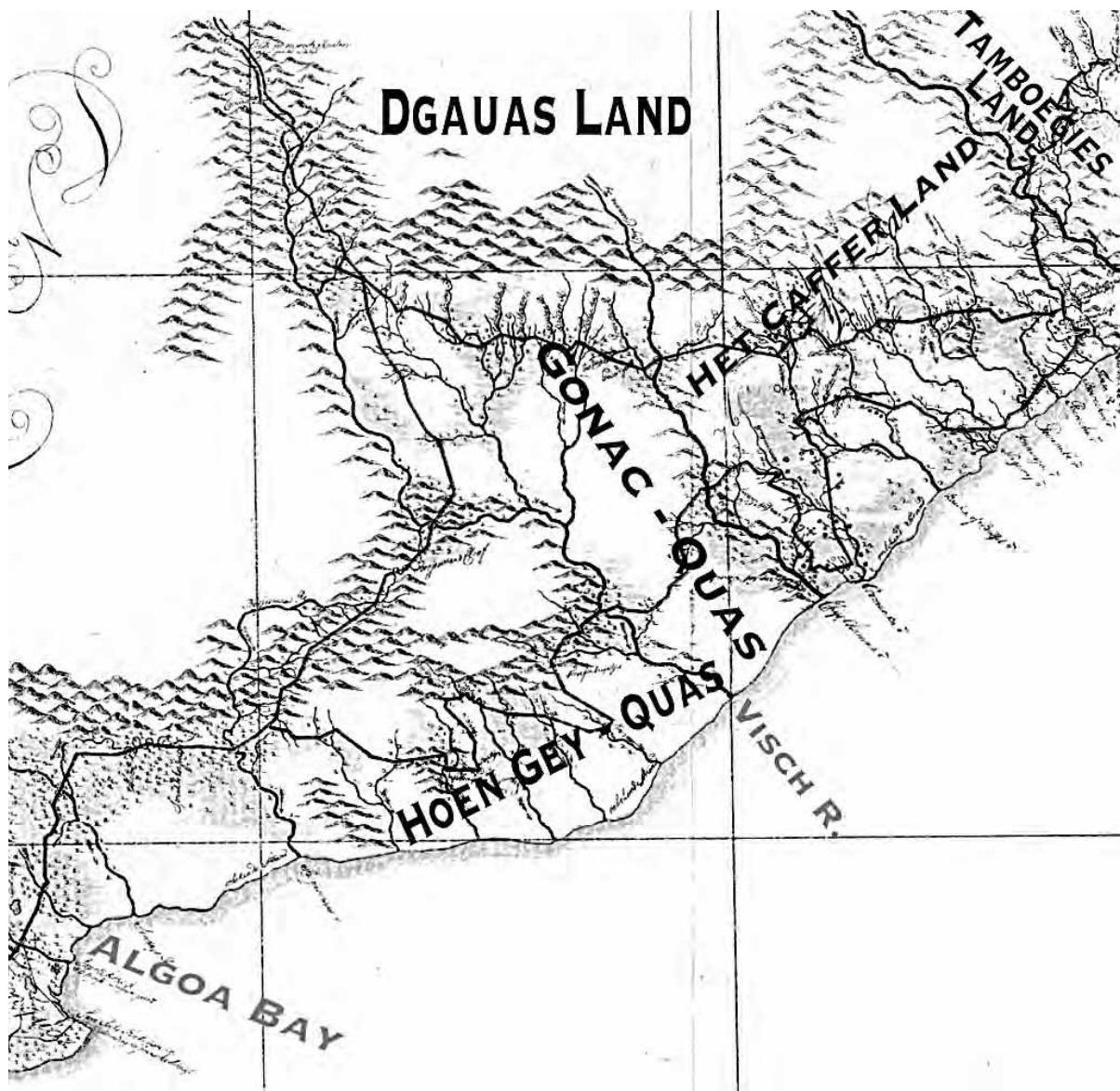
## Ums'obomvu

### Red dawn

A century after the world's greatest trading company had colonised the southern tip of Africa, it dispatched an armed expedition east of Cape Town, seeking new sources of beef. After travelling almost 200 miles in ox-wagons, the men reached Mossel Bay. Here was the last farm '*aan deese oostzyde van Africa by Christenen bewoond*' ('inhabited by Christians on this east side of Africa') (Godée Molsbergen 1922: 272). They travelled on through non-Christian Africa, passing two major bays, Algoa Bay being the easternmost one on the map above. Around here, winter rainfall, too low for crops, gave way to summer rainfall and agrarian potential. In the transition belt, different ecosystems, economies and cultures collided.

The largest label on the map, '*Het Bosjesman Land*', referred to small communities where women and children collected flora and small fauna, providing the bulk of subsistence. Male hunters killed, not least, cattle. Outsiders often gave them derogatory collective names ('Bushmen'). More complimentary was one name bestowed by their neighbours: '*oonondala*', those present at creation, aborigines.

Along the better-watered coast, women had, historically, provided most subsistence through gathering *veldkos* (wild plants), herding sheep and milking cattle. They and

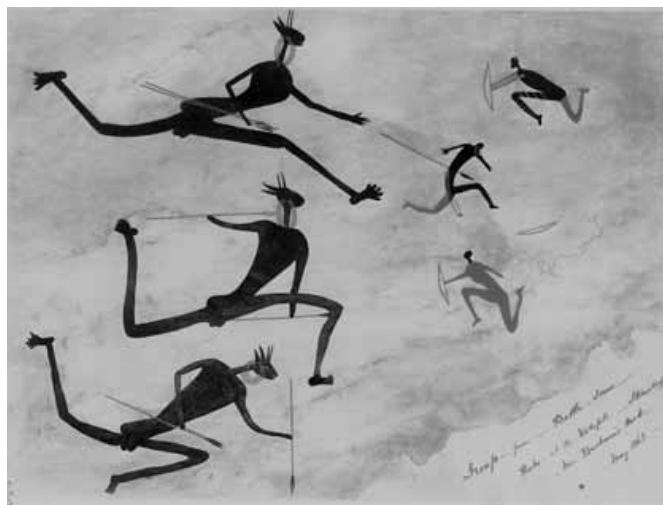


Detail from the map on page 51 showing the Fish River (Visch River), Xhosaland and Thembuland.

their stock-owning menfolk collectively called themselves ‘Real People’ (Khoekhoen). The expedition, however, met few but paupers, who had lost their stock to neighbouring warriors or robbers. Frontier zones typically enshrine masculine interests – and female pastoralists were disappearing. Hybrid lifestyles were emerging. The polity labelled ‘Gonac-Quas’ (‘Foreign Men’) was ethnically heterogeneous, following survival strategies such as working for richer neighbours.

Contained within the last quadrant on the right, second from the top (shown above), was the only country where cattle seemed abundant. The expedition crossed the Fish River. Xhosaland (*‘Het Caffer Land’*) began at the next marked river, and extended to the Kei, the last big river. Here and in neighbouring Thembuland (*‘Tamboegies Land’*), women tilled the soil. The expedition had traversed numerous countries, distinguished less by different male activities than by distinctive women’s work.

• • •



George Stow copied this painting in 1868,  
claiming it depicted amaXhosa hunting 'Bushmen' like game.

Many decades before the expedition's arrival, female gatherers living around the Kei River had encountered invaders from the east. Male hunters were in the vanguard. They were followed by male pastoralists. The immigrants slaughtered women and children, killed game, appropriated land and cattle, renamed rivers. Local opinions of these newcomers were encoded linguistically. They were called '>//kosa', meaning 'the men who do damage', derived from the verb 'to destroy' (Harinck 1969: 152).

The newcomers seemingly adopted this name as a badge of pride, calling themselves 'amaXhosa'. They absorbed subordinates, ranging from wives from other polities, to 'Foreign Men', to shipwrecked Europeans. By 1752, this heterogeneous nation had established control over a heartland, as depicted on the map on page 52. But *emaXhoseni* (the place where amaXhosa are) had no set boundaries.

A patriarchal social order enhanced cohesion. Whatever their origins, women typically lacked independent access to land or stock, tilled the land, performed almost all the heavy manual labour, spoke a distinct 'women's language', and ate separately, of inferior food. Patriarchs controlled homesteads, cattle, politics, all intellectual domains bar healing, and violence. The last was of major concern to their neighbours. This nation, warned the frightened 1752 expedition, was more militarised than any encountered since leaving the Atlantic Ocean. AmaXhosa, warned their western neighbours, sought 'to pounce on foreign nations' (Godée Molsbergen 1922: 288). AmaXhosa, confirmed their eastern neighbour, were ravaging Thembuland. Hunter-gatherers in the north were often redefined as beasts, and pursued with genocidal intent.

Violence was not restricted to outsiders. Rulers (hailed as 'fathers' or 'elephants') might attack insubordinate 'dogs' (commoners). They also struggled for pre-eminence among themselves. The heroes of a nation colonising new territory were aggressive warrior-rulers. Its dominant currency was the spear. Weapons were virtually items of male dress. The name '>//kosa' was well earned.

• • •



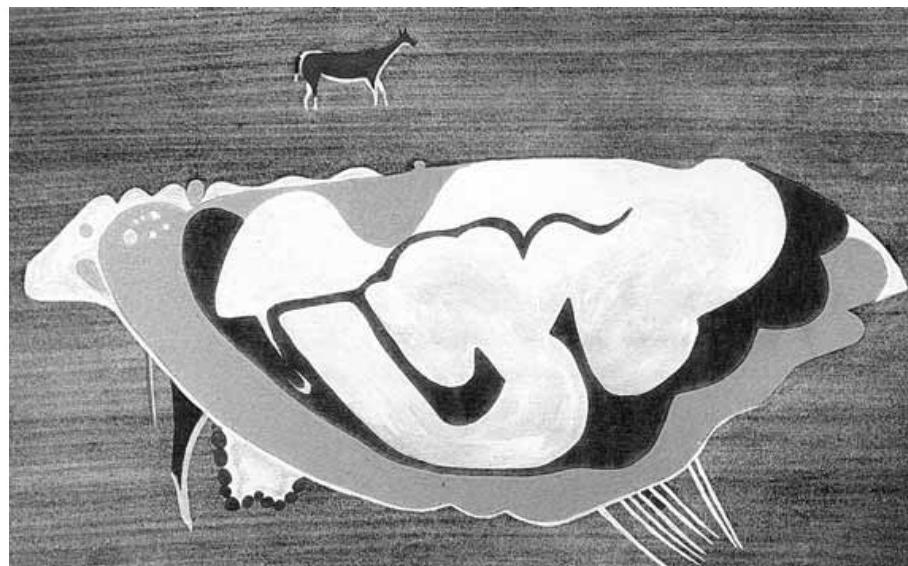
This anonymous rock art partially captures what many remembered about Nolutshungu: she gave birth, as a single woman, to a ‘child of the stomach’.

The lives of almost all ‘dogs’ in the second half of the eighteenth century are lost to history, but one woman was long remembered. Nolutshungu originated far towards sun-rising (well to the east of Xhosaland), suggests one Xhosa biographer (Kaye nd). As a child, after the adults looking after her were killed, she fled westwards to Thembuland. When people here were scattered, she fled westwards *emaXhoseni*.<sup>1</sup>

Here she encountered a custom: maidens would be press-ganged and compelled into sexual encounters with royalty and its clients (*uphundlo*). Nolutshungu hid. When finally flushed out, she had acquired a lover, Balala. But then she became heavy (pregnant). Balala failed to marry her. Normally, women possessed crucial allies in a patriarchal society: their fathers. But Nolutshungu had no father.

She bore this son, called him Magolo (Arse-holes), and left him to the care of his own father. She continued her journey towards sun-setting, entering the slave-owning Cape, where men calling themselves Lords (*Heren*) had their own versions of sexual violence. She began sounding a new note: ‘yayimana isite imite umtana wenkosi’; she constantly said she was pregnant with a child of a lord. On returning to Xhosaland, she was asked where she had met a man among whites. ‘[A]kuko maxosa Emlungwini, mna ndimithe umntana wenkosi’ (‘There are no amaXhosa in whites’ land, I myself am pregnant with a child of a lord’) (Kaye nd: np).

Nolutshungu bore this prince, called Makhanda (One who Pounds). She renounced him, it was said. She placed him in a trench in her home, for years, approaching him only to suckle. Women were expected neither to place infants in the earth, nor to bear sons without known fathers. ‘[U]mntu ngumntu ngoka yise’ (‘a person is a person through their father’) ran popular belief (Rubusana 1911: 502). Although many things might be remembered about a fatherless woman who had traversed patriarchal worlds with little respect for female bodily autonomy, male narrators commonly focused on one feature: she had given birth, in transgressive ways.<sup>2</sup>



Indigenous people often saw the heavens through earthly lenses.  
This depicts a 'rain-animal', bearing hail.

• • •

Men's spears had limitations: *izulu* (heaven, lightning) was unconquerable. About once every four years, serious drought occurred *emaXhoseni*. The rain-giving hole in the heavens, explained a queen mother, had been blocked by malevolent people.

According to scientific discourse, a warm current flowing down Xhosaland's coast collides with low-pressure systems originating in Antarctica, generating violent weather, with wild fluctuations. Whatever the validity of different explanations, rooted in different lifestyles, thunderstorms were spectacular. Storms *emaXhoseni* were compared to being encircled by ten thousand cannons. Tons of water could descend. Crops might be shredded by hail. Stock could die in their thousands. One woman had six members of her family struck by lightning at various times; three died. 'God (*Uhlanga*) has been amongst them,' people would say (Thompson 1962: 449). Although men often fought God, hurling spears, stones and curses at the heavens, victory proved elusive. A storm-god created scenes well captured in the apocalyptic pages of the Bible.

• • •



In characteristic frontier fashion, euphorbias and aloes typical of arid zones mingle with subtropical strelitzias.

In the centre of the image above is the *umhlontlo* (candelabra euphorbia). When the arms of euphorbias are wounded, they leak latex: severely irritant, often toxic, sometimes lethal. Aboriginals used one species to poison water and grass, in order to weaken game. AmaXhosa also acquired a reputation for manufacturing plant-based poisons (*ubuthi*), to kill human enemies. Dread of *ubuthi* suffused daily life; ‘tasters’ existed, since all food was potentially toxic. Fear of death from poison – like the vegetation in which it is rooted – stretches from earliest recorded Xhosa history until today.

Those who killed people in this way were deemed sorcerers. When illness struck, poisoner-sorcerers were prime suspects. When heaven’s hole was blocked, their malevolence was suspected. Specialist shamans, claiming the powers of fearsome animals, popularised their ability to ‘smell out’ poisoners, who were not infrequently killed.

• • •



This depiction of trapped game is imaginative, but captures the violence inherent in hunting.

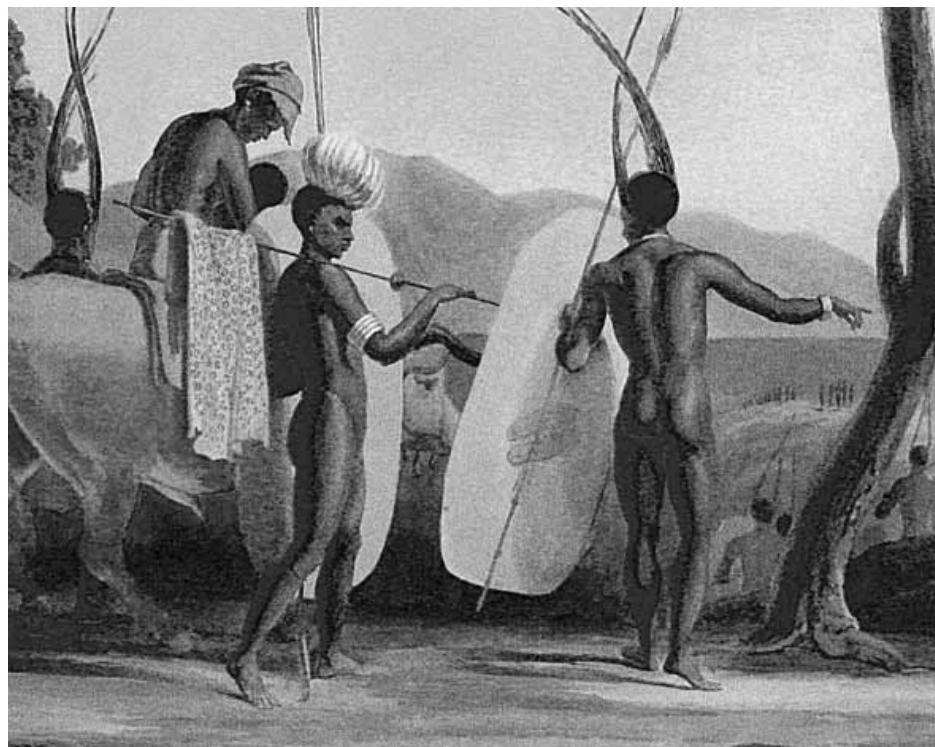
Until the early nineteenth century, hunting was at least as central to Xhosa masculinity as pastoralism. Royalty asserted rights over all cattle, deemed merely on loan to ‘dogs’. Boys were largely responsible for livestock; men’s imaginations were captured by wild animals. They were passionately fond of slaughtering game, using the same weapons as for killing people. Hunts could extend over months; animals were forced to plunge into pits, or encircled, sometimes with walls of flame.

Prowess in slaughter was advertised. Late eighteenth century men wore long antelope karosses. They adorned their arms with canines, claws, and, as a mark of distinction, ivory. Hair and heads were decorated with paws, plumes, bird skins, zebra or jackal headdresses. Until the early nineteenth century, venison was second only to milk as a staple. Although women ate game, wore minor animal products and were porters on hunts, slaughter was a male prerogative.

Major masculine arenas built on the hunting foundation. The sole martial training that existed rested on killing animals. Cattle were re-imagined as game: men cut their horns to resemble those of buck; those of appropriate colours were called ‘black springbok’, ‘red springbok’, ‘female eland’. Royalty was linked with big game: a leopard skin kaross and, outside a Great Place, an elephant’s ears and tail, were its insignia. Prestigious game products had to be surrendered to ‘elephants’. Xhosa aristocracy, ran tradition, emerged when one Tshawe repudiated this obligation, overthrew his overlords, and established a new dynasty.

Tshawe’s descendants ruled those who were colonising land west of the Kei River. But change was inherent in a society coupling heroism to blood. By the 1750s, wildlife was being killed faster than female animals could breed. By the 1820s, Xhosaland allegedly contained less game than anywhere else in South Africa. ‘Men who do damage’ excelled in plunder – but a red dawn had, perforce, to give way to another time.

• • •



Eighteenth and early nineteenth century European observers, including this artist, Samuel Daniell, often waxed lyrical about Xhosa men's virility, terming them muscular, tall, brave, the finest men ever seen.

## Intlazane

### Milking time, late morning

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, poorer lower-ranking Xhosa peasants were on the move. Squeezed out of the heartland by war, lack of game and droughts, many were migrating towards sun-setting. On colonial maps, the Fish River marked the Cape's border. Thousands of peasants waded across it. They were land-hungry. Huge tracts had to be set aside for game; some 20 to 40 acres were needed to support one cow. These pastures were still being walked by women who milked cattle, but the newcomers saw no reason why female pastoralists should not become female cultivators within their own society.

Tiny numbers of hunter-pastoralists of European descent were advancing from the opposite direction. They coalesced around common denominators, calling themselves Boers (farmers) or 'Christians'. Men heavily outnumbered women, whose prime workplace was the home. This gender order shaped class and racial dynamics. Unable to work farms through family labour, Boers drew upon Khoekhoe descendants, accorded the colonial label of 'Hottentots'. One Clara, owning 177 sheep and 33 cattle, thus laboured on a Boer farm in 1798 (Giliomee 1989: 431).

Since the bankrupt Dutch company was here virtually non-existent as a colonial state, Christians were thrown on their own resources as they encountered Xhosa competitors for land. A frightened Swede was met by a group, 'robust and manly':

about one hundred, all men, and each of them armed with a few *hassagais* [spears], or a couple of *kirries* [clubs]. They marched, moreover, directly on towards our waggon, not with the careless gait of ordinary travellers, but with measured steps...with an almost affected pride and stateliness...they came towards us wedged up, as it were, into a close body. (Sparrman 1977: 193–4, 201)

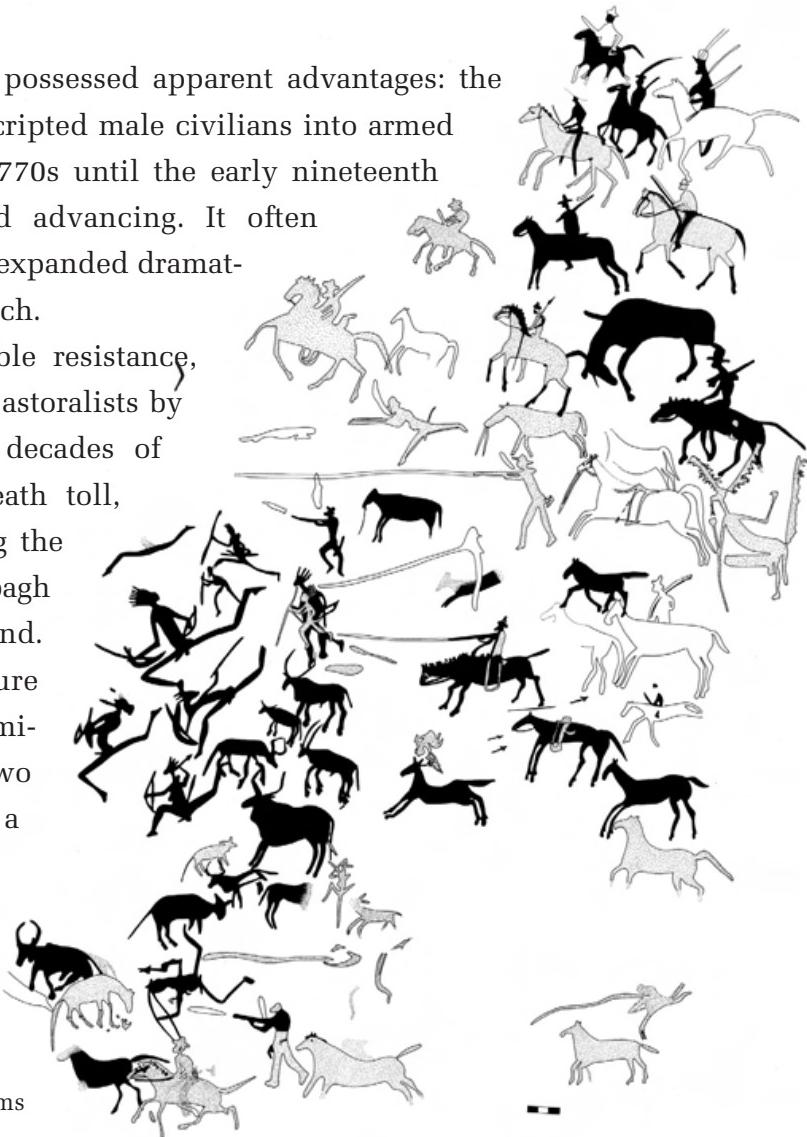
Such intimidation, available to male commoners on an everyday basis, was far more important than mass military mobilisation by royalty. If several thousand amaXhosa, with 15 000 cattle, encircled a Boer squatter, he could do little if they encroached on ‘his’ pastures. If Xhosa men descended on his farm, it was unwise to refuse their requests for hospitable sharing of stock, brandy, clothes. If slaves decided to flee and become amaXhosa, it was hard to retrieve them. Large groups of armed Xhosa men, summarised a lone magistrate, whose district was about the size of Portugal, could virtually do as they pleased. We suffer greatly, cried distraught Boers, ‘from oppression by the heathens’ (van der Merwe 1995: 245).

• • •

Boer men and their indigenous clients possessed apparent advantages: the gun, horse and commando (which conscripted male civilians into armed brotherhoods). Nonetheless, from the 1770s until the early nineteenth century, the colonial frontier stopped advancing. It often receded. A European colony, which had expanded dramatically for over a century, had met its match.

Aboriginal hunters offered implacable resistance, blocking the northward advance of all pastoralists by killing their stock. In 1807–10, after decades of merciless violence and a terrifying death toll, raids and counter-raids continued along the length of the northern frontier, from Tulbagh to the Mathole mountains in Xhosaland. Among pastoralists themselves, seizure rather than slaughter of cattle predominated. Mutual Xhosa–Boer robbery (two clashes have been elevated to ‘wars’) had a standard outcome, well described by a man who grew up in the Zuurveld (which extended from the Fish to the Nqweba/Sundays rivers):

This retracing of (disintegrating) rock art indicates why southern Africans frequently perceived firearms in terms of ‘lightning’.



When our fathers, and the fathers of the Boors, first established themselves in the Zuurveld...they were brothers – until the herds of [amaXhosa] increased so as to make the hearts of the Boors sore. What these covetous men could not get from our fathers for old buttons, they took by force. Our fathers were men: they loved their cattle: their wives and children lived upon milk: they fought for their property...Our fathers drove them out of the Zuurveld: and lived there, because they had conquered it. There we were circumcised; there we got wives; and there our children were born. The white men hated us, but could not drive us away. (Pringle 1827: 74)

Firearms, then, were frightening, but not decisive. Even skilled men could fire only three times a minute, misfiring two out of five shots, with a range of perhaps 150 yards. Moreover, if water rendered ammunition damp, guns were useless. Africa's thunderstorms could defeat Europe's industries.

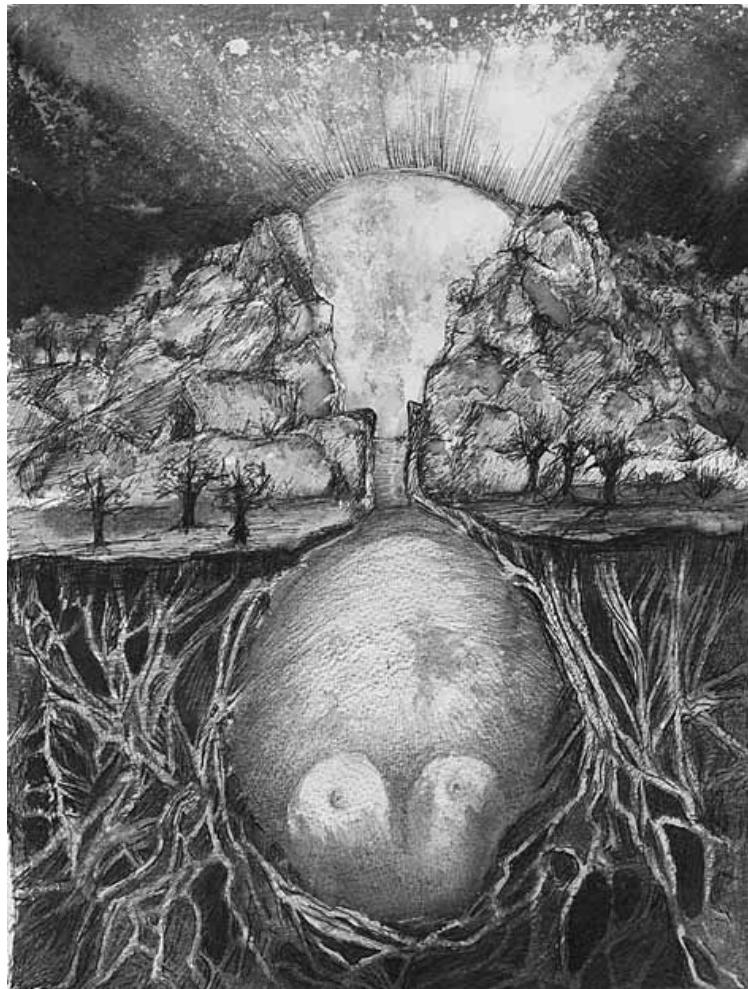
Links between storms and firearms were tightened by culture. As the image on page 59 suggests, guns were not symbols of industries that no one had seen: for many, they indicated that the powers of *izulu* had been tapped. Men with firearms were widely deemed to command lightning, thunder and hail. On the far right of the image is a person-animal: a shaman. When Christians armed with heaven's weapons thundered down on civilian spaces, opponents had every incentive to turn to their own shamans.

• • •

AmaXhosa, urged a colonial official around the turn of the century, should be banished to their ancestral home. He asked them about their origins. All he could learn, he lamented, was the following:

In the land in which the sun rises,  
there was a cavern,  
from which the first [amaXhosa],  
and in fact All peoples,  
as also the stock of every kind of animal,  
came forth.  
At the same time,  
the sun and moon came into being,  
to shed their light,  
and trees, grass, and other plants  
to provide food for man and cattle. (Alberti 1968: 13, lineation altered)

This earth-mother legend was pleasing, and useful. It thwarted colonial officials. It obscured sordid historical origins: as colonisers, dispossessing autochthons. It was more plausible than the biblical tale of a lone Father giving birth to the world – at least



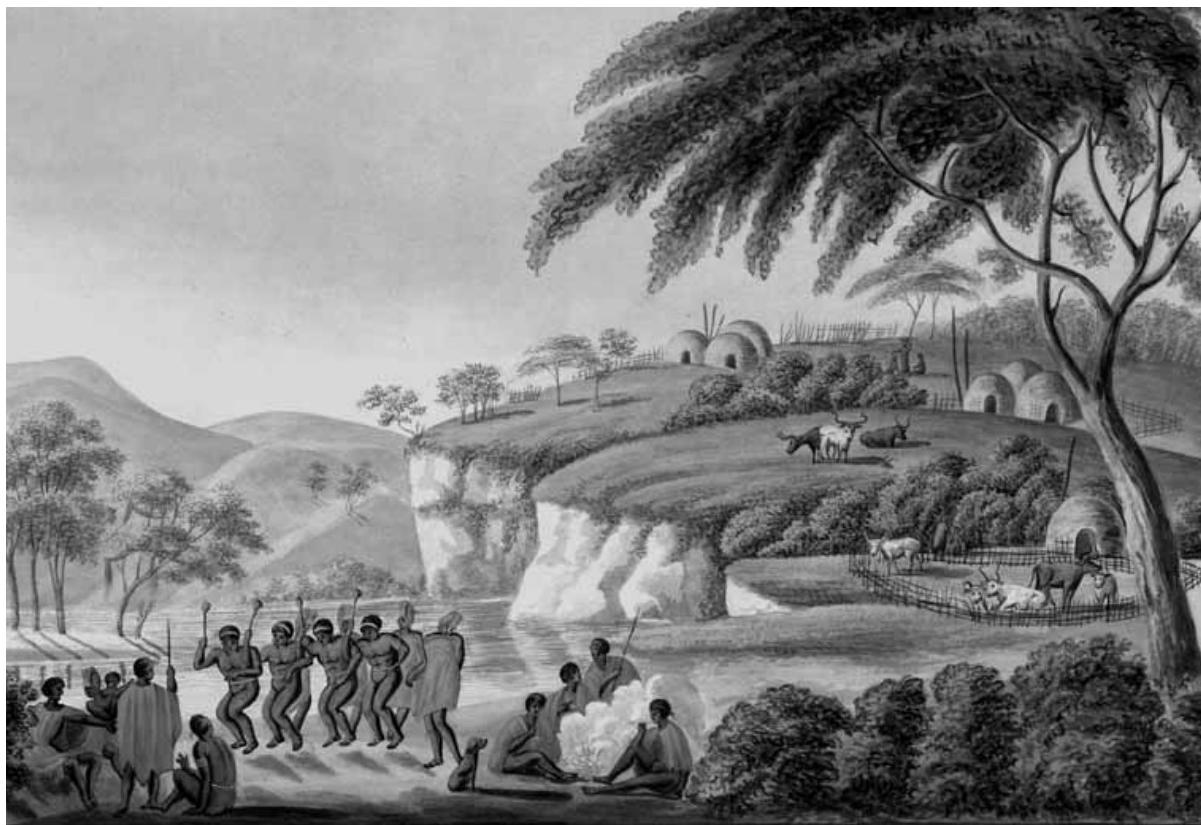
Jill Wenman, 'The Womb of Creation'

to peasants, whose lives revolved around the earth and female fertility. All her people, explained a Xhosa woman to a Christian, 'believed that the cattle came out of a hole of the Earth' (CWMA, J Read to LMS Directors, 9 April 1815).

Everyday culture reinforced indigenous knowledge. At the birth of each child, women both re-enacted and symbolically invoked humanity's first emergence from a dark cavern. (The image above suggests why an earth-mother legend has resonance worldwide.) When recounting history, Xhosa men often started with Creation. The cavern and a male Creator, they explained, shared a name, Hlanga, 'the Source'.<sup>3</sup> Once all had emerged, the male Source took to the heavens, becoming closely linked with lightning, the sun, rain, the moon, stars. The dark female Source acted like a normal woman, preparing for rebirth. Everything on earth flourished in primeval luxuriance, underground. If an entrance were rediscovered, Eden might pour forth.

Deep pools were particularly promising as entrances to the female Source. River people (*abantu bomlambo*) inhabited them. Beneath the water, their dark herds walked on dry land, *eluhlangeni*, in the Source.

• • •



This depiction of a Xhosa homestead was sketched around 1803 by Paravicini de Capelli.

In 1809, the child destined to be the ‘father’ of the Xhosa nation for most of the nineteenth century was born, partaking of Scottish ancestry derived from his mother, Nomsa, a castaway’s descendant. It was high noon. *EmaXhoseni*, having expanded both westward and eastward, had reached its greatest extent ever. A guesstimated 40 000 or 50 000 peasants – double the Cape’s white population – were now between Algoa Bay and the Mbashe River. Others were scattered further afield, on farms and in independent settlements.

Otherwise expressed, when Rhili kaHintsa was born to the Great House east of the Kei River, half his nation was thought to be west of the Fish, within colonial borders. They could not leave, peasants would politely explain. They had been driven west by drought or war. They said ‘they were so happy among the Christians, and that there was no better country for hunting’ (Lichtenstein 1928: 409). Their most influential leader, Ndlambe kaRharhabe, had one Great Place near today’s Alexandria. The second most important *inkosi* was pasturing stock around Plettenberg Bay. A third had trekked to Cape Town, to investigate settling there. Others were north of the Gqili/Orange River. The dominant frontier power was clearly continuing to expand.

If one rode from Uitenhage for five hours eastward, one might everywhere see homesteads resembling those in the image above. Rivers (and river people) were always nearby. Diets pivoted around cows which had recently given birth: the importance of female fecundity was inculcated at every meal. Commoners’ control over cattle had increased in tandem with greater distance from the Great and Right-Hand Houses. Not a cow could be

milked without their permission, faraway royalty continued to assert – but patriarchal rights, in practice, were vested in the oldest men of extended families. As control shifted downwards, cattle became the pivot around which commoner masculinity revolved.

Crops sometimes flourished in small gardens alongside rivers, but are absent from this illustration. During drought or war, three years might pass with zero agriculture. Women's cultivation ran a very poor third to men's pastoralism and hunting as a contribution to subsistence. Not for nothing had female pastoralists avoided tilling poor soil subject to low rainfall. Their descendants constituted a large minority of the Xhosa diaspora, which leaned towards minimal cultivation rather than the extensive agriculture in better-watered zones.

Xhosa wives were thus distinct from most of their peasant counterparts in southern Africa: their agrarian workloads were lighter. To be sure, contributing eight to ten children to peasant labour forces involved recurrent risky childbirth, and heavy domestic labour. Nonetheless, wives tasted the leisure and flirtations that occupied much of their husbands' time. Most commoners were in monogamous marriages. As breadwinners, husbands could ill afford to feed multiple families – and every head of cattle depicted in the image opposite would depart were another wife to be added to this homestead.

Poorer lower-ranking people had clearly transcended the limitations of a red dawn. By migrating, intimidating or absorbing outsiders, multiplying their numbers and their herds, they had moved into milking time, into high noon. Definitions of manhood were shifting away from plunder: 'men' were patriarchs who controlled cattle, fed their dependents on milk, defeated those who threatened their breadwinning roles. Subordinated women, too, benefited as their polity continued its triumphant expansion. Xhosa wives led less burdensome existences than many of their counterparts, and the high value placed on female fertility was symbolised by their genesis story, where 'men who do damage' had been displaced by a womb.

• • •

## **Ukujika kwelanga**

### **The turning of the sun (early afternoon)**

As a new century opened, novel tidings arrived on the eastern frontier. Following the industrial and French revolutions, Europe was engulfed in war for almost 25 years; poorer people sought spiritual aid for cataclysmic times. Millenarianism became relatively mainstream. (In London, an ex-domestic servant, denouncing male villainy, acquired some 100 000 supporters as she declared herself the bride of Christ, pregnant with the Messiah.) Since vigorous efforts were made to warn the rest of the world that the apocalypse was nigh, humble men imbued with millenarianism began arriving in southern Africa as missionaries. Among them was a *déclassé* Dutch army doctor who,



Dr Johannes van der Kemp, Xhosaland's first missionary, declared himself a messenger of the Great Chief of Heaven and Earth. He was given a less reverent name: Nyengana, 'bald head in front'.

days after his wife and daughter drowned, believed he had physically encountered Christ. In 1799, Johannes van der Kemp was struggling towards Xhosaland, to become its first teacher (as missionaries were termed).

The ferocious third frontier war (1799–1803) was engulfing the eastern Cape. Desperate farm labourers, allied with some members of the Xhosa diaspora, were attempting to reclaim ancestral land. Van der Kemp refused to arm himself. Only in self-defence, he preached, could Christians kill. On reaching the relative peace of the Xhosa heartland, he said he had been sent by the Great Chief of Heaven and Earth, to prepare people for Christ's Second Coming. His impact was minimal. AmaXhosa, he mourned, were a nation of atheists.

Having fled Xhosaland, he and James Read, a British millenarian, were allowed to establish a 'Hottentot institution'. The first eastern Cape school (as mission stations were termed) was established in a war zone, near Uitenhage, surrounded by Boer farms and Xhosa settlements. Called Bethelsdorp, it was

nicknamed Bedelaarsdorp, Beggars' Village. The teachers married racially oppressed women, shared the poverty of their supporters, and pioneered two missionary traditions. First, Christianity was not a racial monopoly, as the entire preceding history of Europe and the Cape suggested. Second, school people should either abstain from war, or support Christians.

But Cape Christians, the teachers declared, were not true Christians. Many weapons could be used against 'wicked' Christians: politics, courts, the media, international and almighty support. Apocalyptic divine vengeance on colonists – for shedding native blood, appropriating their land, treating blacks worse than Pharaoh did the children of Israel – could be anticipated. This was exceptionally good news to many desperate dispossessed people. Violence having failed, traumatised descendants of 'Real People' flocked to Bethelsdorp. Poverty, however, compelled many ardent converts 'to wander about the country, working for their bread...they are, by necessity, itinerant preachers' (Philip 1969 Vol 1: 110). The most important disseminators of radical millenarianism were not European teachers, but indigenous casualties of the advance of colonisers, from the west and from the east.

• • •

Around the start of the new century, Nolutshungu returned to the Cape, with Balala, who was seeking work. One farm on which they lived, together with their eldest son and two daughters, was near Uitenhage. Makhanda joined them as a youth, after a conflict relating to his fatherless status. '*[K]uba engenyana kubani*', as the son of no one, he had



Samuel Daniell's 'Boors Returning from Hunting' suggests both the subordination of black labourers and their acculturation.

been overloaded with portage when hunting, despite his desire for an antelope for himself (Ntsikana 1888a: 13).

The price of becoming the son of someone, however, was farm labour. He learned Dutch. He heard tidings from nearby Bethelsdorp. The rising of the dead, at the last sunset, impressed him. He was also exposed to heterogeneous communities of *izi-alam* (poor people, derived from the Dutch 'arm'), and new masculine skills. As the image above suggests, men of Khoekhoe descent often accompanied employers on hunts. Forbidden to waste bullets, they were easily the Cape's best sharpshooters.

Makhanda was a contemporary of Shaka kaSenzangakhona (born c.1787), who was to found a formidable military kingdom further east. Both were sons of single mothers, scorned as sons of no one, yet allegedly sons of lords. Their class positions diverged. In the west, the lord's child grew up as a farm labourer in a European colony.

• • •

As Europe's bloodshed became global in scope, London snatched the Cape as a military base. In 1806, 11 British regiments, supplemented by the Cape Regiment, occupied Africa's tip. The army, in other words, was almost as large as the Cape's entire adult white male population. Officers flowed into the state; economic activities targeted soldiers; in 1808, the Cape Regiment consumed a third of colonial revenue.



'Three shades (The Bully Boys I, II, III).' Wilma Cruise created this sculpture in memory of Nicholas Cruise, killed by a bomb while working for an anti-militarist organisation in apartheid South Africa.

In 1808–09, this militarised state began implementing projects beyond the capabilities of a Dutch business firm. First, divide and rule was pursued. AmaXhosa were to be segregated in their ‘own’ country. The possibility of a broad anti-colonial alliance, emergent in the third frontier war, was to be averted. Second, since Boers were forbidden to employ Xhosa labourers, and blocked from buying new slaves, their labour shortages were addressed. The colonial state lent its weight to criminalising the free movement of ‘Hottentots’, in order to immobilise them on farms, as bonded labour.

Attention was first turned to Xhosa farm workers and outlying peasant settlements. By the end of 1809, thousands had been herded east of the *de facto* border, the Nqweba River. Like Nolutshungu, many were long-standing Cape residents. ‘To my country?’ said one man to his Boer employer. ‘This is my country. I have been fourteen years in your service, you are my father, your wife is my mother, I have never been in [Xhosaland] except to bring back your cattle; I will have no other country’ (MacLennan 1986: 61). He was flogged and forced to leave.

The vulnerable were targeted: not dense peasant settlements. Rather than risk war with Xhosaland, in the midst of global bloodshed, authorities preferred to cede occupation rights up to the Nqweba River. But a cycle of masculine violence had begun. As farm workers were extruded from the west, so peasant communities aggressively settled around Boer farms in the east. *Imfazwe yeMida* (War of the Boundary Lines) effectively began in 1809: not on battlefields, but in domestic arenas, involving intimidation, personalised violence, theft, murder, arson. By late 1811, only one house occupied by whites existed east of Uitenhage. Some 500 farmhouses had been burned.

The question had arisen, declared outraged British officials, as to who was to possess about a third of the Cape Colony. Boers, with their dismal history of defeat, were not acting in ‘a manly manner’ (Giliomee 1966: 336). ‘[U]nless a sufficient force is immediately sent to the aid of this part of the colony it must fall, and I shall not be surprised to see the Kaffre Nation extend itself within a short distance of Cape Town’ (1966: 334). In 1811–12, almost 2 000 men were mobilised, two-thirds being soldiers (mostly brown men hustled into the Cape Regiment, deemed useful allies against their historic enemies). These exemplars of imperial manhood lined the Nqweba River to drive a guesstimated 15 000 women and children, and 5 000 men, back to their heartland.

This time, the local men at the cutting edge of violence were backed by the colonial state and resources, commanded by a veteran of global warfare, and ordered to target civilian spaces. They were to descend on all homesteads, such as that in the image on page 62, and eradicate them from the face of the earth. After a couple of weeks, after frontline peasants had lost 2 500 cattle and their *inkosi* had been assassinated while asleep, Ndlambe led his followers in precipitate flight back to the heartland. Their crops and homes were destroyed. The guerrilla war of *bittereinders* (remaining militants) was crushed: ‘burnt all their Kraals, their plantations cut down and destroyed, many of their people shot, several Hundreds of their women and children taken and sent prisoners to Colonel Graham’ (CO 2613, G Fraser to Colonial Secretary, 31 July 1818). The expropriated terrain was placed under military occupation. At its heart lay new military headquarters, with new homes, named Graham’s Town, after the victorious British commander.

*Imfazwe yeMida* (1809–12) was a turning point in Xhosa and frontier history. On colonial estimates, half the nation had been uprooted. The entire Cape had been placed out of bounds. No longer were amaXhosa expanding towards sun-setting, as they had been doing for centuries. They were now retreating, towards sun-rising. No longer were their menfolk the terror of surrounding nations. They had met their match, in brown soldiers and ‘Witte zeemensen (*Engelschen*)’ (de Kock 1965: 80). More precisely, they had barely attempted to confront ‘white sea people’, since protection of patriarchal property had loomed larger than valour. Having shifted from martial towards pastoralist definitions of masculinity, men had chosen to protect their herds rather than fight over land.

The first mass forced removals in South African history culminated in the creation of two distinct countries, divided by a porous Berlin wall: the Fish River, guarded by 27

military posts. Women were permitted to cross this border. Any Xhosa man found west of it risked being shot. What had altered, summarised one Englishman, was this: ‘Under the Dutch they were plundered, and oppressed by the boors; under the English by the Government itself’ (Pringle 1827: 69).

The sun, then, had turned. Due, ultimately, to revolutions in Europe, the balance of power had swung against Africans on a distant frontier. But reversing this trend remained possible. Millenarianism had been exported along with militarism. This new religious weapon, capable of inspiring commitment far greater than that associated with secular ideologies, was about to be deployed.

## Emalanga

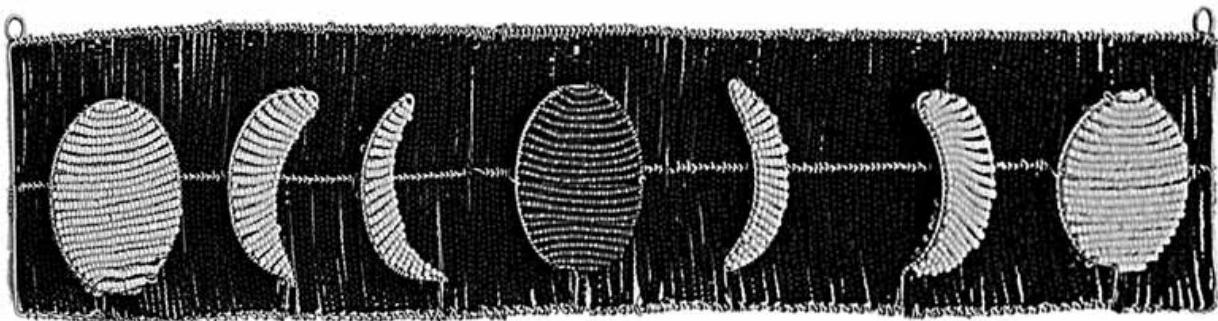
### In the afternoon

In 1814, a millenarian wind began gusting through the frontier, lasting for five years, until 1819. It originated at ‘schools’, after their secular attempts to limit murderous colonial violence had largely failed. When ‘school people’ were then squeezed economically, to drive them onto farms, they intensified their own spirituality and, armed with missionary documents giving them right of movement, criss-crossed the eastern Cape. Unless they ran for refuge to Christ, black audiences were warned, they would perish. This had resonance. A ‘great awakening’ swept through desolate terrain.

This had three significant features. First, at a time of intensified bondage, many favoured spiritual treasures which masters were unable to touch. As one convert informed her baas (male employer), ‘You have now...my body, but not my Soul, that belongs to me, or rather to Jesus, my Saviour’ (CWMA, Read to LMS Directors, 24 August 1815). Second, almost any male (including a nine-year-old boy) could summon public meetings and preach. Democratisation enhanced accessibility: she now realised, reported a joyous Xhosa woman, that Christ understood isiXhosa. It also fuelled innovations. According to one soldier-preacher, polygyny was permissible; reading from the Bible was not; the ‘born again’ should hop.

Third, this ‘great awakening’ had strong millenarian overtones. ‘Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him,’ ran the biblical text favoured by one evangelist (CWMA, Report of the Mission at Bethelsdorp for 1815). Visions of the crucified Christ burgeoned. Startled people, confronted with midnight processions of hymn singers, leapt out of their homes, thinking the Last Day had come. ‘Beggars’ Village’ was termed Paradise, where inhabitants awaited God’s return. Millenarianism had been successfully transplanted, from war-ravaged Europe to a war-ravaged African frontier.

• • •



Multiple deaths and rebirths – in domestic, environmental, cultural, military and international domains – surround Makhanda's rise to fame. These are symbolised by Eddie Dube's 'Inyanga idliwe (The moon was eaten up)'.

The name of one preacher was soon on many lips: a man *unesithunzi* (with an aura). He had an imposing masculine presence. Burly, handsome and well over six feet tall, he towered over everyone but Boers. He possessed remarkable liver (courage). Eloquent, speaking at least one African and one European language, he had wide-ranging intellectual interests, extending to Britain's Constitution. Men often had a dozen praise names commemorating their characteristics. His included Langa (Sun) and Mntwana (Child, Prince).

After being forcibly returned to Xhosaland, Nolutshungu had entered a female-dominated profession, becoming a renowned *igqirha* (shaman), while Makhanda underwent rebirth, becoming an adult man. Having been circumcised by a spear-wielding man, and given his first spear, he abandoned her. He refused to eat food she or others prepared: it was defiled with their sins. His relationships with men were also fraught. This newcomer from farms, now wandering through the veld, was unable to use a spear, it was said.

Then he, too, saw the crucified Christ. He appeared 'under the name of the nations father' (CWMA, Read to LMS Directors, 24 August 1815). Otherwise expressed, an isolated outcast had found an almighty Father. Bloodshed should end, said the bleeding patriarch. Men must lay down their spears. A sign was promised, as confirmation. The moon, announced Makhanda, would be eaten up. As new year began and Europe's wars finally ended (June 1815), the full moon collapsed into a crescent, turned the colour of blood, and was totally eclipsed. Then a reborn white sliver burgeoned into a full moon.

This echoed many other deaths and rebirths, and was the latest in a series of disturbing phenomena since the start of *Imfazwe yeMida*. Almost unprecedented earthquakes had rocked the Cape's capital and military headquarters in 1809 and 1811. Amid terror of annihilation, racially oppressed soldiers had flocked towards missionaries. Then the sun was eaten up (1811). An 1813 great flood swept away at least one Fish River military post; vicious storms the following year ruined many more. Now the full moon had died. Disturbances in the natural world are classic catalysts of millenarianism – and Makhanda, from the first, was tightly linked to them.

A bloody moon did not, however, win immediate acceptance for his condemnation of spears. He was instead deemed mad, and threatened with incineration. Christ, he declared, had delivered him. He sent a message to Bethelsdorp, begging for a white teacher and for Dyani Tshatshu, who was being groomed as Xhosaland's first black missionary. There was no response. His request was being directed to the pinnacle of the colonial state, since it breached cold war principles.

To the astonishment of his compatriots, Makhanda then crossed into the forbidden land. In Graham's Town he found, as his visions foretold, a servant of Christ who lacked two teeth. Where was his spear, asked military authorities. His 'Lord had taught him that it was a bloody weapon, and that he must throw it away', he replied (CWMA, Read to LMS Directors, 5 January 1816). He was allowed to receive instruction from Christ's toothless servant: an ex-painter who, as army chaplain, was baptising racially oppressed soldiers flocking into the 'great awakening'.

After spending some four months in this Dutch chaplain's home, Makhanda became known as a convert. He may have been among the first baptised Xhosa Christians – and had certainly undergone the requisite ecstatic conversion and instruction. On walking home, soldiers ordered him to cross the border early. He had first, said Makhanda, to ask his *Inkosi* for grace for the day. A white sergeant ordered him to be shot. You 'may kill my body but cannot take my soul that will have a most glorious place', he responded. But, were the sergeant now to die, 'your soul will go to the burning flames' (CWMA, Read to LMS Directors, 5 January 1816).

Having displayed a hallmark of his entire career – fearless resistance, rooted in religious conviction – Makhanda began preaching. '*Yizani nonke, dinixeletele indaba zoyihlo wenu*' (Come ye all, that I may tell you news of your father) (Bennie 1839: 93). Their Father, he said, wanted the land to be put right before it could prosper. Bloodshed, theft and fornication – including royalty's sexual practices, like multiple wives, mistresses, seizure of maidens – were taboo. When the first man had been created, he explained, God 'took a Rib from him, and made for him one wife, and if he had seen that more was necessary he would have made him more' (CO 2603, Read to J Cuyler, 18 May 1816). The army chaplain's pupil, claiming to be following in van der Kemp's footsteps, was popularising a patriarchal deity familiar to Europeans.

Women, the mainstay of all teachers, found his message appealing. They were being invited into a world where the sexes mingled, subject to rules which curbed male privileges and gave women opportunities. A Bethelsdorp woman was among Makhanda's disciples; she read God's book to them. Called 'Praying amaXhosa', they continued to bombard Bethelsdorp with requests for teachers. Female disciples walked some 200 miles, to Uitenhage and back, praying *en route*.

• • •



'Refugees' (anonymous)

In this eastern outpost of a 'great awakening', evangelists addressed a particular audience: refugees from the country of Christians. Crammed into a narrow belt in south-western Xhosaland – and separated by blood from the head of Xhosaland's Right-Hand House, Ngqika kaMlawu, whose subjects in the north epitomised traditional martial masculinity – their fortunes had plummeted. Their political 'fathers' were shadows of their former selves; commoners were restlessly shifting from one overlord to another. Famine prevailed for a year after their exodus. For the rest of the decade, crippling drought occurred once every two years. Game was almost non-existent. Many wore sheepskins, ate a meatless diet. For about eight months of every year, the exceptionally sour pastures to which they were confined had the nutritional value of sawdust, or worse, since cattle sickened and died. The scarcity of pastures, the lack of water, the paucity of cattle and game, astonished an 1816 observer. He wondered how large numbers survived.

Theft and beggary constituted men's solutions, but women were intensifying agriculture. As crippled masculine legs gave way, women were expanding back-breaking work, for nine months each year. Yet the dry heavens undercut their efforts. In the heart of every homestead, beneath the cattle kraal, lay a subterranean granary. But while this echoed the cosmic womb, it was frequently empty. Moreover, as intensive

agriculture was added to pregnancy and domestic drudgery, overloaded women were inducing abortions by poisoning themselves.

Then a charismatic outsider appeared. He was communicating with everyone's Father. He was bending colonialism and the heavens to his will. He was brushing aside lethal weapons. '*[U]mkontw' awungeni*' ('the spear does not pierce him') ran his praises (Ntsikana 1888a: 13). Commoners flocked to his meetings; a thousand people might attend a Sunday service. When investigated by Ndlambe, his chief, the preacher revealed the source of his powers. He was not to be called the son of Balala; he was the son of the Great Lord of Heaven and Earth.

So popular was this prince, and so weak were rulers, that the elderly Ndlambe and his embattled allies adopted him into their own circles. Commoners saluted him as a chief, with a praise name capturing the ambiguities: *A! Nxele!* (Hail! Left-handed Man!) By mid-1816, he was deemed one of the four most powerful rulers in all Xhosaland. Certain aristocrats denounced him as an upstart, but he asserted superiority over them all. '*[Z]onke inkosi mazibambelele kum, ukuze zibe nobukosi*' ('let all rulers cling to me, so that they retain the power to rule') (Bennie 1839: 94).

Within a year of his vision, an ex-farm labourer had experienced gravity-defying upward mobility. Makhanda, in his patchwork kaross, had been borne upwards by popular acclaim, as he demonstrated startling powers in a chaotic world: over colonialism, the heavens, royalty. What participants in the broader 'great awakening' would make of this son of God, however, remained to be seen.

• • •

A missionary-cum-spy, decided officialdom in 1816, would be useful in Xhosaland. Bethelsdorp evangelists, including Andries Stoffel (seated in the centre of the image opposite) and Read (standing in the centre), were permitted to cross the border. Initially, they were rapturously welcomed as the fulfilment of Makhanda's prophecies. Sixteen years earlier, Xhosaland's first teacher had struggled to make a single convert. Susceptibility to Christianity, noted Read, had soared due to defeat, poverty and Makhanda.

Christianity, however, was open to different interpretations. Makhanda's preaching, in missionary eyes, was defective. He had 'a most strange notion of his birth, as derived from the same mother as Christ' (Read 1818: 283). Christ's younger brother was beyond the missionary pale. The new house of God was erected in enemy terrain, near Ngqika, under a British carpenter (suspected of spying) and Dyani Tshatshu (standing on the left.)

Political antagonisms were promptly overlaid with religious hostility. Makhanda, too, found his competitors defective. '*Babetela ubawo abelungu*' ('whites nailed down our father' [to the cross]). God's Book proved whites' predilection for blood. '*Tina maxosa asinatyala enkosini; abelungu benetyala, bafuna ukusulela kuti numhla*' ('we amaXhosa are not guilty before the lord; whites being guilty, they now want to defile us') (Bennie 1839: 100). Trying to atone for their crime, they placed their heads on the



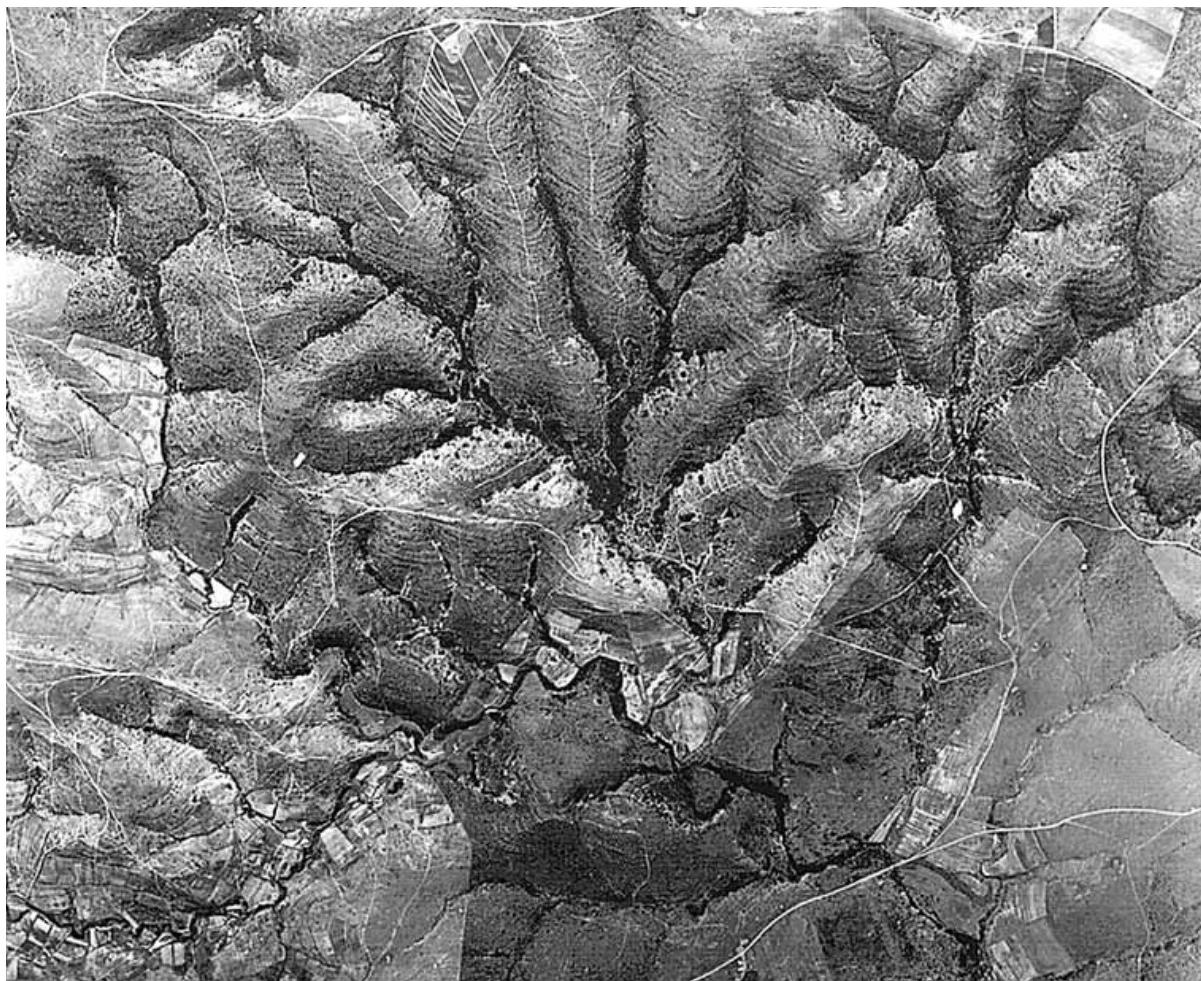
This depicts leading evangelists giving evidence in London in 1835–36.

ground and uttered meaningless words. But their liturgy made the innocent physically sick. God should rather be worshipped by dancing, beautification with cosmetics (ochre), making love and multiplying, so that innocent blacks filled the world. This politico-religious controversy was of great interest, and even royalty swung towards a son of the soil. He embraced Makhanda's religion, declared Maqoma, Ngqika's influential son, since prayer was unnecessary and seizure of maidens permissible.

Makhanda's new-found enthusiasm for male sexuality and female fertility had personal roots. He, a married man, had impregnated Ndlambe's niece, and been coerced into marriage. Initially, such was his distress that he visited the 'school', saying he had come as a child to be set right, having broken his Father's ban on multiple marriages. There was now starvation, he glumly declared. God's wife lived in heaven's reservoir. When she turned her face from sinners, no rain fell (CWMA, J Williams to LMS Directors, 7 August 1817).

In the eyes of westernised men, a bigamist was constructing an extravaganza. Moreover, not only was he forced to wed a princess, he also married two aboriginal women. The mission establishment surveyed a man who broke their rules, denounced whites as murderers, spoke of 'the despised nation (the Hottentots)' – and abandoned him to his own resources (Read 1818: 283).

• • •



This is a bird's-eye view of one side of the watershed on which Makhanda lived.

Makhanda's Great Place was located on a watershed, near the Mgwangqa River and today's Ngquushwa (Peddie). He overlooked a curvaceous, feminised landscape, through which sinuous streams wound towards the sea. His patriarchal status was enhanced by councillors. His chief councilor, who rivalled Makhanda in masculine appearance and oratory, was the Zuurveld refugee who revered fathers as *men*.

Location in an African environment accelerated convergence with popular spirituality. Where did his Lord live, people asked. '*[I]semhlabeni zantsi*' ('in the earth below and also in water') he replied (Bennie 1839: 94). This accorded with indigenous knowledge of the underworld and river people. Once a life-giving womb had been incorporated into sacred geography, Christian ideas about the afterlife became comprehensible. Long were Makhanda's words remembered: '*nina niso abantu bayafa abafi baya kulonkosi*' (you yourselves say people die, they do not die, they go to the Lord's natal home) (Kaye nd: np). '*Abantu bapantsi komhlaba, bayakuvuka*' ('the people are beneath the earth, they will arise') (Ntsikana 1888a: 13). These Christian precepts had previously made little headway, but a patriarch with four wives and five infants, promoting fertility as a form of worship, disseminated them with ease. He linked them to a cosmic womb, used the familiar 'Hlanga' as a god-name, allowed it to be thought

that he had risen from the underworld, and insisted on people being buried underground, with key possessions, linking them spatially to the female Source.

If deities were increasingly diverging from those of Europe, god-names widened the gap. Missionaries favoured unfortunate nomenclature. ‘Thixo’ (God) was largely used in Xhosaland as an exclamation when sneezing. By contrast, Makhanda’s names underlined creative powers: ‘Dal’idipu’ (Creator of the Deep) was particularly favoured. God’s Great Son also had praise names. ‘You call him Jesus Christ. I call him Taay,’ Makhanda informed a missionary (Mostert 1992: 432). A particularly masculine name for Christ also circulated: Sifuba-sibanzi, the Broad-Chested One.

‘Dal’idipu’ (*dali + diep*) was a crossover name symbolising some of Makhanda’s most significant contributions to Xhosa religion and history. Linguistically, it stitched an African to a European language. Semantically, it drew the fearsome ocean, mastered by ‘sea people’, into a landed world. Makhanda was an outstanding *bricoleur*, creating memorable syntheses from elements previously deemed separate. He sutured, in particular, the cosmos to the cross. The sea, sun, moon, storms, cliffs, rivers, cattle, trees, grass, shells: all were accorded sacred significance. Lightning was to be averted by crying ‘*zulu lika Tayi!*’ (‘lightning of Christ!’). When crossing rivers, his converts saluted their underworld Lords: ‘*A. Tayi! A. Dalidip!*’ (Ntsikana 1888a: 13). Sacrifices and purification rituals were welded onto these practices. Van der Kemp’s most memorable achievement had been to demonstrate that prayer could produce storms, but Makhanda’s cosmology extended far beyond this.

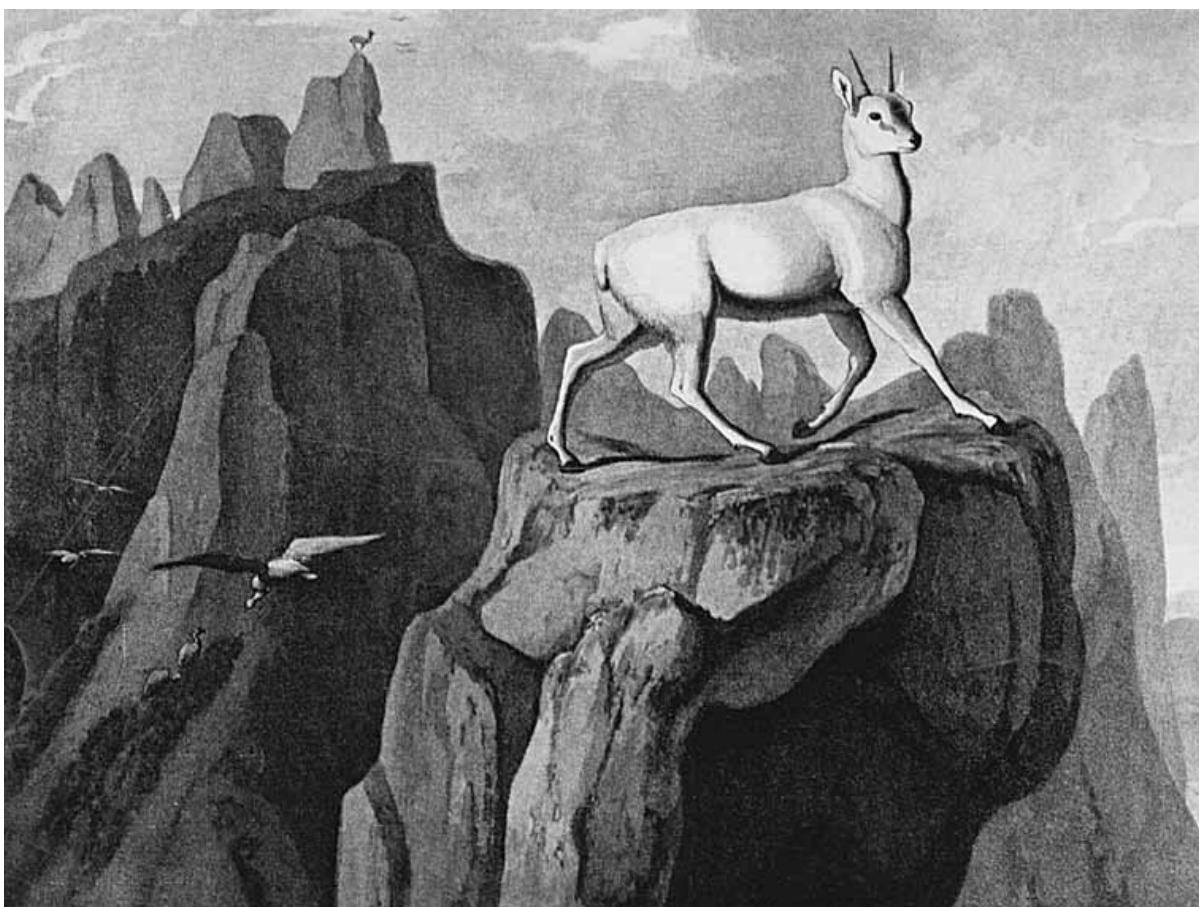
Rooting religion in nature and broader culture consolidated tidings that the dead did not die – since they told the same story. The moon structured calendars; it died every month (*inyanga ifile*). Then it was reborn, grew to fullness, and again died. In spring, women buried seeds displaying no signs of life. If rain fell, crops sprouted. Caterpillars disappeared into cocoons; they reappeared with wings; one such creature structured maidens’ initiation into womanhood. Rooted in nature’s subsoil, peasant culture was permeated with themes of death, metamorphosis, rebirth – and Makhanda, himself recently reborn, was but adding another strand to common knowledge.

He also continued energetically to enforce an Africanised version of the Ten Commandments. ‘[L]athlani ubuti, lathlani igazi ezonto zibulala abantu’ (‘forsake poison, forsake bloodshed, those two things kill people’) ran his prime command (Kaye nd: np). Men were forbidden to enter his Great Place if armed; only for hunting were weapons permissible. ‘Forsake poison’ had a corollary: search homesteads for weapons of sorcery. Theft was not merely banned: Makhanda and his disciples descended on homesteads, wresting away stolen stock. For many impoverished peasants, inhabiting a world where cattle sickened on pastures, where thieves, violence or sexual crimes could inflict grievous losses, religion assisted economic survival. Blood, *ubuthi* and incest, explained Makhanda to a wealthy ruler, were disliked among his people because ‘*ingakutulwa inkomo*’ (‘the cow can be erased by them [through fines]’) (Bennie 1839: 100).

These prohibitions were gendered: they weighed far more heavily on men than on women. The shifts that masculinity had already undergone were to be extended: men were to become upright peasant patriarchs, respecting property, renouncing violence, displaying filial obedience to Fathers outranking all secular rulers. Makhanda sought new men for new times. He encountered life-threatening opposition – pious policemen were not high on everyone's agenda. But since the son of God bowed before no man, brushes with death simply confirmed his key tenets: a ban on weaponry, the significance of the afterlife, and the centrality of superhuman forces.

• • •

Makhanda's hostility to spears and poison coexisted with his relish for weapons of mass destruction. He popularised the Flood. His Father would return, he prophesied, incinerating sinners with heaven's fire. He himself could bury all unbelievers, by making heaven and earth meet. A memorable fate was predicted for subjects of Ngqika. Makhanda denounced one of Xhosaland's greatest rulers as a thief who '*wahlal' epet'igazi*' ('always handled blood'), and who was so promiscuous that he slept with a woman deemed his mother (Ntsikana 1888a: 13). His followers would become firewood and ants. During one such confrontation with Ngqika, ran tradition, a storm suddenly



A mountaineering antelope (the *klipspringer*, rock-leaper, *igogo*), depicted here by Samuel Daniell, lent its attributes to a shamanic speciality. A human *igogo* was deemed capable of seeing far beyond mortals.

erupted. '[B]angcangcazel...bati, "Kubetwa un-Gqika gu-Nxele gezulu"' ('People tremble with fear...and say, "Ngqika is struck by lightning by Nxele" ') (Bennie 1839: 102).

Politics, prophecies and weapons of mass destruction interested men far more than attacks on male privileges. Makhanda's fearless confrontations with the powerful provided frisson; so did his pursuit of thieves, using clairvoyance. '*Lomntu makarunywe, ade abonakale into ayiyo*' ('let this person receive religious offerings, until he reveals who he really is') said pragmatists (Ntsikana 1888a: 13). Throughout Xhosaland, patriarchs warded off potential danger by propitiating him with cattle.

As an *igqirha*'s son accumulated religious offerings, so many decided who he was: an *igqirha eliligogo*, a shaman-who-is-a-*klipspringer*. As the image opposite indicates, this buck has an uncanny ability to race up and down precipices and perch on pinnacles. Its human counterpart was similarly deemed to live high above mortals, bounding over obstacles, seeing into distant space and time. Deemed the supreme *igqirha eliligogo* in Ndlambe's domain, Makhanda occupied an elevated position. Such a seer outranked all shamans, and was consulted on every important occasion. Political sanctions bolstered prophetic authority. Drawing upon the tradition that all cattle ultimately belonged to rulers, the seer sometimes told men which particular beasts the Lord required. Those resenting such exactions risked losing their cattle to Ndlambe.

How should one conceptualise a patriarch operating as a leading shaman, a powerful politician, a nationalist preacher, a son of God? Makhanda, scholars have claimed, rapidly returned to Xhosa traditions. He made claims 'unacceptable to Christianity', 'had never been a Christian' and 'met with minimal response' as an evangelist (Hodgson 1985: 17, 21, 18).

Another formulation is possible. An ex-farm labourer, deeming himself a follower of Christ, was transplanting a world religion into virgin African soil, in the overarching context of imperialism and a bloodstained frontier. Receiving little but rejection from his missionary brothers, he was showered with traditional honours by his constituency. Yet in 'left-handed' ways, he continued to disseminate central Christian tenets: an Almighty Father and Great Son; prayer, preaching, the key Ten Commandments and the lessons of God's Book; a great awakening of the departed and an apocalyptic Day of Judgement; the resurrected Christ, who occupied centre stage from start to end. Makhanda was far more successful in spreading these novel ideas than westernised rivals operating in Xhosaland simultaneously. The new 'school' acquired no converts. On its disintegration, those settled around it fell under the leadership of the aristocratic Ntsikana kaGabha, whose congregation consisted of about 100 people. By contrast, Makhanda possessed 'almost unlimited influence' (Philip 1969: 163). He achieved this by promoting Christianity, noted a superintendent of the London Society's mission institutions. Makhanda 'professed (though after a peculiar fashion of his own) to be a disciple and apostle of Christianity' (1969: 164). Another mission assessment was tarter: '*Lo ndoda yazenza u-Tixo gesiqu*' ('This man made himself God incarnate') (Bennie 1839: 93).

If placed in historical perspective, within the array of congregations under African control that emerged after missionaries' advent, the Left-Handed One occupied the lowly *amaZiyoni* (Zionist) end of the spectrum. As an archetypal prophet-chief, projecting divinity, he headed a syncretic movement of the poor, welding older traditions onto the possibility of miracles – as in Christ's time. Ntsikana represented the 'Ethiopian' pole: his tiny congregation adhered closely to nineteenth century missionary doctrines. Tshatshu, the educated son of royalty, was completely within the teachers' fold. From this perspective, lowly Zionism was far and away the most influential form of Christianity making inroads into an African society during its early encounters with a world religion. Makhanda might also be hailed as a pioneer in the African Reformation which continues to this day, worldwide. He has seldom been recognised as such, but perhaps scholarship heavily weighted towards elite versions of Christianity needs rethinking? Zionist congregations, after all, are 'part of a second global culture; a culture, lying in the shadow of the first, whose distinct but similar symbolic orders are the imaginative constructions of the resistant periphery' (Comaroff 1985: 254).

Another ex-farm labourer, also deemed a Black Christ, expressed it more poignantly:

*iVangeli silibone elisha selishis' intaba,  
Kwathi abefundisi nabashumayeli baliphika.  
Bathi akuseliyona iVangeli ekade silishumayela,  
baphenya amaDastamente namaBhayibheli abavumela,  
athi, 'Kubhaliwe kanjolo!'  
Uhlamuka simuke...*

The New Gospel which we saw setting the mountain on fire,  
and preachers and evangelists denied it.

They denied that we had just preached the Gospel.

They brandished their Testaments and Bibles in unison.

They said, 'It is written *thus!*'

Breaker-away, let us leave... (Gunner 1988: 220)

• • •

The religious divide was rapidly widened by blood. In 1817, during retrenchments after Europe's wars, the Cape Governor disbanded the Cape Regiment and turned to new black allies. The colonial state would support the unpopular Ngqika as supreme ruler over all Xhosaland, if he aided their coercive projects, including raids on thieves.

When Ngqika compounded his sins by seizing land, and violence erupted, he routed the Great House. The seer had a vision appropriate for an opponent of spears and a proponent of Christ's lightning: '*[A]ma Ngqika uyakuwawisela ngezulu*' ('he will strike down Ngqika's people with lightning'); '*[A]nikulwa ngazikali, uyakusizila ngezulu*' ('you will not fight with weapons, he will crush with lightning') (Ntsikana 1888b: 32). Less than fully convinced, regiments representing the entire country gathered in October 1818, beneath Ntaba kaNdoda, the Mountain of Man, to annihilate Ngqika's army, the bastion of martial masculinity. Some balked. 'Those men...have eyes full of blood; we are like boys to them...I am going to fetch Nxele (Makanda) to bring down "heaven" upon them' (Wauchope 1908: 36). Men went into battle with spears in their hands and Makhanda's prophecy on their lips – and shattered their opponents. Their enemies were tossed into bonfires; their womenfolk were looted, put to flight. The house of Ngqika became fire-wood and ants, as the seer had predicted. Thereafter, Ntaba kaNdoda stood at the heart of many Xhosa prophecies of the end of the world.

• • •

Inkosi Ngqika kaMlawu wears the leopard skin kaross of royalty.



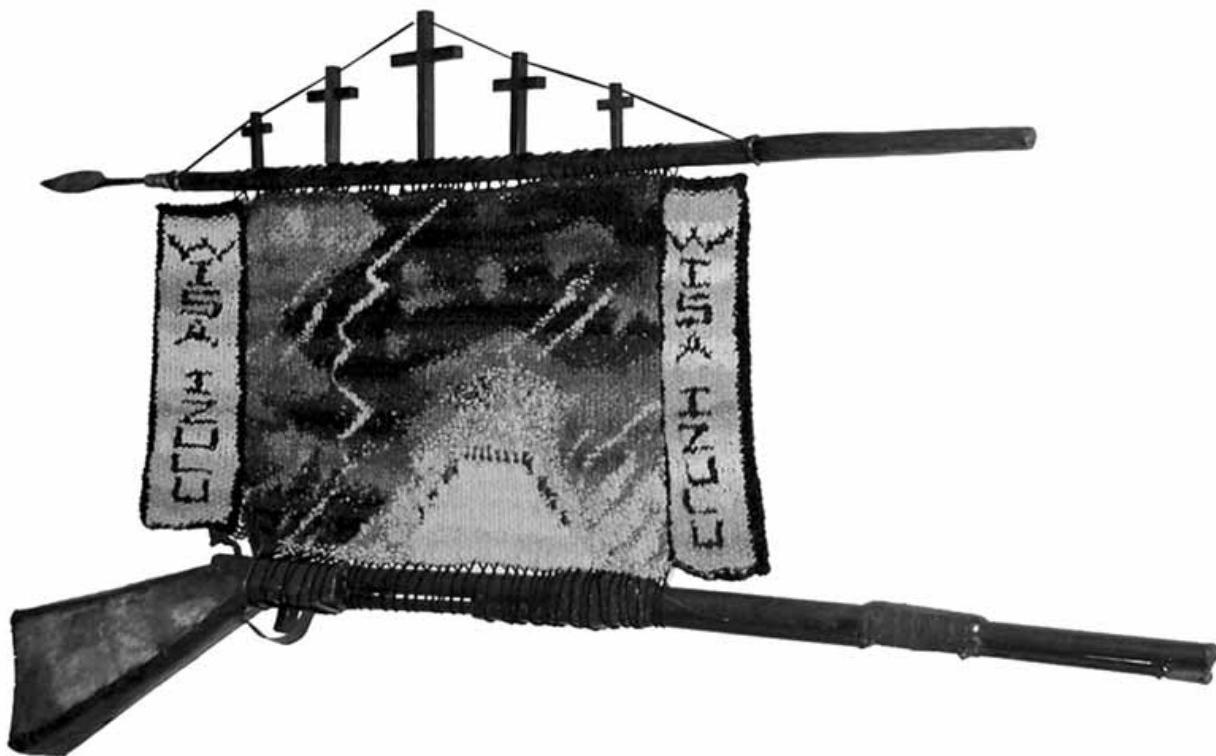
Lord Charles Somerset, Cape Governor in 1817, wears the military attire characteristic of his own aristocracy.



Apocalyptic scenes continued. When Englishmen rushed to the aid of their ally, cannons bombarded the bushveld. '*Isasazekile imikosi kungalwanga, ngokoyika inkunu, kwatiwa balwa ngezulu*' ('regiments were scattered without fighting, due to fear of the cannon, it was said they fought with lightning') (Umhlab' unotuli 1898: 3). Cattle were lost almost in their entirety; starvation stalked homesteads.

Then drought finally broke. Storms lashed the region incessantly. A tidal wave of starving men poured into the Cape, pursuing stock. Almost the sole barrier was the 'City of God' (the Theopolis mission station), with its expert sharpshooters. Boers fled. British soldiers were unable to defend property, unable to maintain their posts, unable to save their own lives. '[W]e destroyed your soldiers. We saw that we were strong,' crowed Makhanda's chief councillor (Pringle 1827: 75).

Amid torrential storms, and the mobilisation of colonial forces from further afield for renewed invasion, the seer provided a different interpretation. He singled out ammunition and arms as the keys to victory. He predicted endless wars if spears continued to confront a maritime empire. And he offered weapons from his own arsenal. The English, having been condemned to citizenship of the great deep for the crime of murdering God's Son, were now emerging from the sea, with fire, under a petty chief, Thixo. '*u-Tixo asinto yaluto, ayakutshiswa gu-Dalidepu*' ('Thixo, who is of no consequence, will be burnt by



Nomsa Zamela, *Ndiya kukuwisa izulu pezu kwabo* (I shall let heaven fall upon them). Depicting one of the most significant battles in South Africa, this image singles out two forces: men's weaponry, and powers transcending those of men.

Dal'idiipu') (Bennie 1839: 100–1). '*[L]ati igogo (u Nxele), liya kuliwisa nalo izulu, liwabulale ngalo amangesi*' ('the *igogo* (Nxele) said, he too will throw lightning down, and kill the English with it') (Umhlab' unotuli 1898: 3).

In April 1819, as colonial forces marched eastward towards the ammunition depot of Graham's Town for their invasion, some 14 000 people marched westwards on the same village. The presence of several thousand children and women signalled that this was no ordinary confrontation. The great crowd was journeying '*ezilweni*': to the place of wild animals, as the English had been redefined (Ntsikana 1888b: 32). As hunters, men possessed the right to kill 'wild animals' with weapons. They did not expect to do so. English guns, prophesied Makhanda, would harm no one. '*[A]lye esithi amaXhosa akayi kulwa ngezikhali khona, aya kulwa ngokuwisela amaNgesi ngezulu*' (He was saying amaXhosa will not fight with weapons there, they will fight by striking the English with *izulu*) (Bennie 1935: 2). Any survivors would flee to the sea – 'and then,' prophesied the seer, 'we will sit down and eat honey!' (Pringle 1827: 72).

At the start of a day called after Graham, the 1812 victor, a literal as well as figurative turning of the sun was awaited: afternoon was the standard time for storms. Preceding its advent, military commanders and Makhanda gravely weakened the tiny garrison through bloodless tactics. Capturing the British commander, however, narrowly failed. Around noon, pursued by the crowd, he galloped into a village where fewer than 350 men were making frantic preparations. Their seven artillery pieces were not in readiness. As the Xhosa vanguard poured in, about 1 000 veterans peeled away, targeting the magazine and barracks over a mile from the village. Most inexperienced men rushed down the hills, aiming at the cannons, typically with their spears tied up. A vanguard reached two cannons and attempted to overturn them.

At this critical moment, 130 hunters from the 'City of God', accidentally in the village, rushed into the fray. They picked off leaders. British troops rallied. Xhosa men were forced back 35 yards from the troops, where they knelt on the hillside. Every time the cannons flashed 'lightning', they covered their eyes and prayed, calling upon Nxele and Christ to strike with lightning: '*O Wisa izulu Nxele! wisa!! wisa Nxele!!!*' (Umhlab' unotuli 1898: 3); '*[W]isa Tayi! wisa Tayi!!*' (Ntsikana 1888b: 32); '*Teta Nxele! bapela abantu!*' ('Speak Nxele! the people are perishing!') (Wauchope 1908: 36).

To British bewilderment, fusillades did not dislodge some 5 000 praying men. The couple of hundred soldiers were ordered to advance. When the trumpet sounded, the prophet's men began to flee. The veterans were exposed to brown-skinned sharpshooters – and Graham's Town was soon free of all but dead amaXhosa.

• • •



Thomas Baines depicted (for a later war) a common method of carrying the Xhosa dead and wounded.

During a century of eastern frontier warfare, no greater loss occurred in any one battle. The village stream was renamed *egazini* (place of blood). The British had lost three men. Fifty times as many Xhosa men expired at the site. Many more died while being dragged homewards. There were preferable ways of carrying the incapacitated, as the illustration suggests. This, combined with acute hunger, contributed to events that night, as Graham's Town lost all its cattle.

When about 14 000 people marched towards the promised land – children, women, many subjects of both Great and Right-Hand Houses, royalty – they were riding on the crest of successes during torrential storms. When they fled, an explanation emerged. Sorcery was responsible. Three days beforehand, sorcerers had been at work. This, declared Makhanda, was blacks' only sin. It had urgently to be addressed. This, after all, 'was the most significant battle of the nineteenth century in South Africa, for had Nxele succeeded, the history and character of frontier South Africa indubitably would have been quite different' (Mostert 1992: 479).

• • •

After this bold attack, invasion of Xhosaland was delayed for three months. Ships trawled the coast, searching for a potential harbour, to land in the enemy's rear. Xhosaland in its entirety was now the target.

As scouts kept watch, peasants followed normal practices during lulls: purifications, feasts, dances, for tomorrow we die and cattle are lost. The seer proposed a great hunt, with much food. He required many of the looted cattle: all of which were black, or red, or yellow, or dun-coloured, or pregnant. The hunt was to culminate near the sole potential harbour (modern East London), at a giant rock which peasants called Gombo, and sailors termed 'the Coffin'.

There they come!...only one river more, the Nxuba (the Fish River), and they will be in our land...Let us combine, and be one powerful nation, that we may drive the *Umlungu* into the sea...Dal'idipu appeared to me and spoke to me saying, 'Tell my people to...kill all dun-coloured cattle.' He will cause all the dead to rise from their graves. They will come out of the sea, ready and armed to the teeth...Go to the sea, you will hear a wonderful sound, *Gombo, Gombo*. When you hear the sound sing aloud and dance, calling the name of Ta-ee – the broad-breasted (*Sifubasibanzi*) son of Dal'idipu – whose name is a charm against witchcraft and all manner of evil. Then you will hear a big sound Gombo! and then the resurrection of the dead. (Wauchope 1908: 34–5)

This vision was an Africanised version of ships possessing soldiers hidden in their bellies. It was revealed to desperately hungry people with great gaps in their ranks, facing imminent loss of whatever cattle they possessed. They owned little, except



Part of the spectacular hollow within Gombo's cleft.

forefathers who were *men*, a prophet offering abundant beef and venison, and a promise that they ‘would soon be strong as the time was now come for the Resurrection of their Fathers’ (Brownlee nd: np). Ndlambe (who had lost three sons *egazini*) and his leading allies ordered their subjects to participate. Motley cattle poured in; subjects of the Great and Right-Hand Houses participated.

From a distance, Gomo (‘Plunge-In-and-Disappear’) resembled an island. Two curvaceous mounds, separated by a cleft, were sprayed with foam. On closer viewing, a sandy promontory linked it to the shore – and, at the base of the cleft, itself seven-storeys high, lay a hollow into which breakers roared, carving out caverns, shooting up through chimneys, cascading over smooth slabs in the sea. Sexual symbolism saturated the site. ‘Plunge-In-and-Disappear’, declared a poet, was his wife: water contained within walls with a gap (Rubusana 1911: 489). The pool was also an archetypal entrance to the underworld.

At this intersection of heaven, sea, earth and cosmic womb, of masculine death and feminine birth, ecstatic worship occurred. Hunters, having deposited carcasses, were instructed by Nxele, the husband of two descendants of those present at creation. He had developed purification rituals to counter sin and instil immortality; men purified themselves in the sea. They prayed, calling on ‘the broad-breasted (*Sifubasibanzi*) son’, who would protect them against sorcerers, who (it was said) were about to descend into a cavern beneath the rock. To the drumming of the waves, thousands thumped down upon Gomo’s sandy belly, leaping, hopping, dancing, assisting it to yield its riches through the birth canal. Their shaman was elevated; he was to make a superhuman leap, the leap of a buck, plunging from a rock near the shore onto one in the sea. Darkness would descend, as the sun similarly plummeted, returning to its birthplace. The breaking of the waters would make the ‘big sound *Gomo!*’ – and those who had never died would emerge, as in the days of Creation.

Yet as the sun traversed the sky, and the seer followed its trajectory while calling on Christ, and hunters finally yelled at him to leap, he failed to do so. Men, he declared, had been told to purify themselves in the sea. They had instead bellowed war cries. Consequently, they were not permitted intercourse with the nation of the Broad-Chested One.

*[I]nto mna endiyibonayo, niyakubuya senizingela inyamakazi*’ (‘The thing that I myself see, you will return and by that time be hunting a buck’) Ntsikana had prophesied (Ntsikana 1888a: 14). Yet if failure were due to male militarism, and starving people could feast on beef, might not other attempts be more successful? There were ‘pilgrimages to Gomo’ (Wauchope 1908: 35). Tidings spread further afield: of a great prophet, who could guarantee victory, make departed warriors visible, restore cattle to life as well. Refugees fleeing Shaka were among those who sent messengers to Nxele and fulfilled orders: to kill red cattle and goats, to get rid of grain. Many were the hungry paupers who feasted on what their enemies eyed – and awaited a ‘great awakening’, as fathers more potent than sons were reborn.

• • •



Simthembile Mamani's 'The Black Christ' was originally produced for a 2001 Grahamstown exhibition, 'Makana Remembered'.

In August 1819, a fortnight after the invasion finally began, two emaciated women walked into a military camp. Makhanda, they said, wished to negotiate peace. He would be jailed, they were told. The next day, accompanied by these women, his aboriginal wives, the Lord's Child delivered himself into captivity. '[P]eople say that I have occasioned the war: let me see whether my giving myself up will restore peace' (Pringle 1827: 74). He spoke little, beyond asking that war on cattle ceased; his people were starving. He was sent over the sea. The war machine rolled on, inflicting devastating defeat and dispossession. In August 1820, Nxele joined a mass escape from Robben Island – and, claimed whites, drowned.

Messiahs do not die that easily. Nxele's martyrdom, like that of a more famous son of God, enhanced his reputation. His disappearance into the sea, it was said, occurred on 25 December, the anniversary of Christ's birth – and he was accorded a similar future. The prophecy he had made upon departure was carved upon hearts: whatever power white men used against him, he would return. His disciples disseminated his teachings to remotest Xhosaland; subsequent European teachers were judged against the son of God. Entering terrain which had already experienced a 'great awakening', they made little impact. Until the late nineteenth century, peasants instead awaited the one who would come from over the sea, with the attributes suggested by the image on page 85: the leopard skin of royalty, the crown of martyrdom, the ability to transcend men's militarist games. '*[K]usitwa uyeza, uyeza, inanamhla*' ('it being said he is coming, he is coming, to this very day') (Ntsikana 1888b: 32).

These were millenarian expectations – of an Africanised Second Coming. Their intensity increased every time bloodshed attained new heights. When the ugliest of all frontier wars erupted in the 1850s, intersecting with seismic anti-imperialist wars over the sea, the return of the black Christ, the black Sifuba-sibanzi, lay at the heart of a millenarian tidal wave.

## Conclusion

I began with stories about a teenager, who allegedly murdered her nation by promising that buried men would become visible, led by the Broad-Chested One. She, we are told, was very different from a man who made similar promises. He was a 'giant prophet and wardoctor'; she was deceitful, promiscuous, sexually frustrated (Peires 2003: 23, 196). Such double standards, in both scholarly and popular accounts, have fuelled segregated histories, where Nxele's and Nongqawuse's millenarianism is assessed very differently. Yet gender bias has divorced mass movements which can profitably be considered together. Both were millenarian upsurges within the same imperialist epoch; both can be analysed using similar tools. Moreover, re-investigating the headwaters of millenarianism contributes to our understanding of the subsequent flood, in four key ways.

First, I have attempted to indicate the benefits of broader geographical visions than normal. The Nongqawuse story is typically crammed into a narrow space: Xhosaland, or Xhosaland-and-the-Cape. Yet this is at odds with preceding history. The Xhosa polity was embedded in broader frontier dynamics, and transformed by forces global in scope: imperialism, international warfare, a world religion. Nolutshungu, who travelled widely, lived on farms where *izi-alam* of different ethnic origins mingled, and was uprooted because Europe was undergoing revolutionary transformations, led a life which cannot be squeezed into many latter-day maps. Similarly, spiritual gales blowing through war-ravaged Europe, and a 'great awakening' among South Africa's first casualties of colonial advance, were linked to a new religion sweeping through

*emaXhoseni*. During first-wave millenarianism, underclass spirituality crossed the rivers and seas that men defined as political borders; during the second, it poured over seven southern African countries and was linked to warfare in Russia, India, and Europe. To focus on Xhosaland alone is to miss the awesome force of one of the largest anti-imperialist movements ever to erupt in southern Africa.

Second, I have tried to show the advantages of a longer historical perspective. When a 1752 expedition traversed the frontier, traumatic disintegration of a way of life – an archetypal cause of millenarianism – was already evident among female pastoralists and their menfolk. When their incorporation into bonded labour intersected with an influx of lowly European missionaries, millenarian ideas in an African accent began to be popularised. But only in a particular era did these resonate in Xhosaland. I have spoken metaphorically of a red dawn, milking time, high noon, afternoon, and of *ukujika kwelanga* ('the turning of the sun'). Wilma Cruise's image on page 66 is juxtaposed to my summary of the 1809–12 turning point: an ominous image, chosen to signify the impact of British imperialism and its gender dimensions. Rhili kaHintsa, born in 1809 into a dominant frontier power that had attained its greatest extent ever, had lived through two devastating defeats and spectacular contraction of his country by the time he was ten. His was an archetypal background for a man who, as Xhosa paramount ruler, commanded obedience to millenarian anti-imperialist visionaries.

He was also born at the cusp of gender transformations. At the time of his birth, hegemonic masculinity was shifting: The images on pages 53 and 57 were giving way to those on pages 58 and 62. Hunting and 'elephants' were yielding to pastoralism and domestic patriarchy; intimidation on home fronts was more important than war in adding Boers to the list of those complaining of Xhosa oppression. But when 'sea people' put pastoralists to flight, the very possibility of becoming '*men*' in older ways was called into question. Patriarchal power was eaten away by irreversible economic losses in the fourth and fifth wars of dispossession; by defeat, which feminised men; by further loss of rulers' legitimacy, allowing visionaries from a female-dominated profession to flow into the vacuum; by men's descent into theft and beggary; by women's forced march into breadwinning roles. In half the nation, homesteads once dependent on male prowess as colonisers, hunters and pastoralists were giving way to the back-breaking cultivation and weak leaders of defeated refugees (see the image on page 71). In such circumstances, a Father commanding weapons of mass destruction proved appealing – but amaXhosa also looked backwards, to their own golden age, before the horns of the bulls were shortened. When Nxele's chief councillor spoke longingly of pastoralist fathers who were *men*; when Nxele promised rebirth of patriarchs armed to the teeth; when Nongqawuse told of the arrival of the warriors of whom Nxele had spoken, wearing antelope karosses, all were invoking pre-1812 days. If erosion of a way of life underpins much millenarianism, erosion of once hegemonic masculinities was central in Xhosaland. And the irreversible blow, subsequently reinforced, was delivered by British imperialism in the 1809–12 War of the Boundary Lines.

Third, I have tried to show that if gender and changes in the gender order are key concerns, then new themes emerge, neglected in literature which takes patriarchy and machismo for granted. War, for example, is critical for understanding southern African millenarianism. The intimate links between death of the land and hunger for cosmic rebirth pervade my analysis. But this connection is hard to discern in much secondary literature. Accounts focusing on clashes between armed men – that is, accounts privileging machismo – are many. Accounts investigating religious responses to unspeakable horrors are few. This bias towards machismo impacts on analysis. Nongqawuse's era, for instance, fits with the broader pattern: the build-up of military forces and threats to unleash the dogs of scorched earth warfare, were the single most important factors influencing refusal to cultivate crops, and rhythms of feasting on cattle. Yet this build-up and these threats are almost invisible in analyses: militarism is deemed significant only when men began shooting. Similarly, Nxele, the so-called wardoctor, strides through secondary literature virtually free of numerous 'feminine' features. These include his single mother and her background; his rise to fame during a 'born again' movement; the importance he attributed to nature and a cosmic womb, thereby making resurrection plausible; ecstatic worship at an opening to the female Source during war; and, above all, his hostility to weaponry and male militarism. If these aspects are accorded greater prominence, then a 'son of no one' searching for an apocalyptic Father becomes visible. He headed a mass movement promoting the divorce of masculinity from militarism, and led an attack on military headquarters while denouncing male weaponry. This is unthinkable within scholarship. It has been ignored, together with 5 000 men kneeling before cannons invoking *izulu*, Christ, the black son of God. Visual and vernacular sources illuminate this better than scholarship (see the image on page 80). Constructions of gender affect themes, concepts, periodisation, sources deemed significant, representations of both sexes – and are of considerable import in the stories ultimately told.

Finally, first-wave millenarianism contributes directly as well as indirectly to our understanding of the second wave – because the past did not die when Nxele sank into the sea. It was not even past. In 1850–57, when many who had known him had risen to leading positions and were battling to survive similar crises – hunger, aggressive colonialism, looming and actual death of the land, a chaotic natural world – the black Christ returned. He spoke through mouthpieces, including a man deemed the son of his chief councillor (who became perhaps the pre-eminent visionary of the era), and his own son, born of the impregnation drama. Themes evident in the 1810s surged back into prominence. The second wave cannot be adequately understood without constantly revisiting (a revised version of) the first, because the messiah's return was, of course, accompanied by the return of his teachings.

The past's ongoing vitality also affected the teenager conveying the orders of men who had arrived from over the sea. When Xhosa contemporaries honed in on a female seer active for nine months (a significant period in societies pivoting around female fertility); when they accorded her very different treatment from all other visionaries; when they

spoke of her in the same breath as a male messiah; when they insistently told of his virility and her pregnancy, they were not merely exercising poetic licence. These Xhosa historians must be taken very seriously indeed, as I have underlined by drawing on their genre and language. They were singling out Nongqawuse not for her prophecies, which were commonplace, but for being impregnated by an other-worldly messiah.<sup>4</sup>

Her story echoed that of Nolutshungu. It helps explain the photograph taken when Nongqawuse was a political prisoner (see the image on page 45): the ostentatious beadwork is not that of a maiden, but of an extremely unusual wife. The importance ascribed by contemporaries to her pregnancy aptly symbolises the problems of latter-day analyses which construct a scapewoman while bypassing reproduction, masculinity, the vernacular voices of male contemporaries – and a past which lived on. When the history of this millenarian era is rewritten, narrators will need to grapple with the cosmic cataclysms anticipated when birth occurred, as *izulu* travailed in labour, and the waters of the great deep broke. To this should be added the trauma of a teenager, who failed to fulfil the hopes invested in her life-giving capacities. If extracted from its historical context, the tale of tens of thousands of people, who positioned a pregnant maiden as a link to a messiah, might be deemed the true Nongqawuse story, in all senses of the phrase. But it was far from singular, in comparative terms. And it rested on all that had preceded it: peasants' forced march into a harsh new world, from which little but a virile black Christ could offer deliverance.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to those who have aided me with this chapter, particularly Jane Bennett, Natasha Erlank, Nomboniso Gasa, Jeff Guy, Zolile Mtati and Msokoli Qotole.

#### NOTES

- 1 Many African languages can encode a locative in the noun. IsiXhosa does so by adding an 'e' prefix and a suffix. So 'emaXhoseni' means 'in Xhosaland'.
- 2 Some sources allocate Makhanda a father. But they contest who this father was, offering at least three candidates. Others pointedly note his base-born origins, and their inability to identify a father. The most plausible explanation is Kaye's (nd): impregnation by an unknown man.
- 3 Under the impact of missionaries and colonialism, this meaning of *uhlanga* was supplanted by 'nation' or 'race'.
- 4 The most illuminating sources discussing this pregnancy, and the Nongqawuse–Nxele connection, are praise poems. These are best read not as individual poems, but as a corpus, deploying standard metaphors for key actors, places and events. The single best-published collection of such poems is Rubusana (1911).

#### REFERENCES

- Alberti L (1968) *Ludwig Alberti's account of the Xhosa in 1807* (2nd edition). Cape Town: A.A. Balkema.
- Bailey B (2003) *The plays of miracle & wonder*. Cape Town: Double Storey Books.
- Bennie J (1839) *Eyesibini Inncwadana Yokufunda*. e-HRen: Aldam No-Harvey.
- Bennie W (ed) (1935) *Imibengo*. Lovedale: Lovedale Press.
- Bradford H (1996) Women, gender and colonialism: Rethinking the history of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones, c1806–70. *Journal of African History*, 37: 351–370.
- Bradford H (2004) Framing African women: Visionaries in southern Africa and their photographic afterlife, 1850–2004. *Kronos*, 30: 70–93.

- Brownlee C (nd) A few brief details referring to the two prominent characters mentioned in the school book, compiled by the Rev. J. Bennie, Umxeli (or Lynks) and Sikana'. Unpublished manuscript, G10.b.10(2), G. Grey collection, National Library of South Africa.
- Burridge K (1969) *New heaven new earth*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- CO (Colonial Office) records (1812–1820) Unpublished manuscripts, Cape Town Archives Repository.
- Comaroff J (1985) *Body of power spirit of resistance: The culture and history of a South African people*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- CWMA (Council for World Mission Archives), London Missionary Society (LMS) correspondence (1799–1857). Unpublished manuscripts, National Library of South Africa.
- De Kock W (ed) (1965) *Reize in die binnenv-landen van Zuid-Africa, gedaan in den jaare 1803 door W.B.E. Paravicini di Capelli, Kapitein aide de camp by den Gouverneur van Caap de Goede Hoop*. Kaapstad: Van Riebeeck-vereniging.
- Giliomee H (1966) Die Administrasietydperk van Lord Caledon 1807–11. *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 29(2): 220–354.
- Giliomee H (1989) The Eastern Frontier, 1770–1812. In R Elphick & H Giliomee (Eds) *The shaping of South African society, 1652–1840*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
- Godée Molsbergen EC (ed) (1922) *Reizen in Zuid-Afrika in de Hollandse tijd* (vol. 3). S-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Gqoba W (1888) Isizatu Sokuxelwa Kwe Nkomo Ngo Nongqause. *Isigidimi SamaXosa*, 1 March.
- Gunner L (1988) Power house, prison house – an oral genre and its use in Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14(2): 204–227.
- Guy J (1990) Gender oppression in southern Africa's precapitalist societies. In C Walker (ed) *Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945*. Claremont: David Philip.
- Harinck G (1969) Interaction between Xhosa and Khoi: Emphasis on the period 1620–1750. In L Thompson (ed) *African societies in southern Africa*. London: Heinemann.
- Hodgson J (1985) A study of the Xhosa Prophet Nxele, Part I. *Religion in Southern Africa*, 6(2): 11–36.
- Iliffe J (1992) *The African poor: A history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jolobe J (1959) *Ilitha*. Johannesburg: Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel.
- Kaye W (nd) Ati Maxosa enbalini yawo. Unpublished manuscript, G10b.10, 172c, G. Grey collection, National Library of South Africa.
- Lichtenstein H (1928) *Travels in South Africa in the years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (2nd edition). Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society.
- MacLennan B (1986) *A proper degree of terror: John Graham and the Cape's Eastern Frontier*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Mda Z (2000) *The heart of redness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mostert N (1992) *Frontiers: The epic of South Africa's creation and the tragedy of the Xhosa people*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Mutwa V (1966) *Africa is my witness*. Johannesburg: Blue Crane Books.
- Ngcobo-Masabalala D (1997) *Mhla Ngengqawule*. Alice: Lovedale Press.
- Ntsikana W (1888a) Imbali ka Makanda Ogama Limbi Lingu Nxele. *Isigidimi SamaXosa*, 1 February.
- Ntsikana W (1888b) Imbali ka Makanda Ogama Limbi Lingu Nxele, No. 2. *Isigidimi SamaXosa*, 2 April.
- Peires J (1990) Suicide or genocide? Xhosa perceptions of the Nongqawuse catastrophe. *Radical History Review*, 46/7: 48–57.
- Peires J (2003) *The dead will arise* (2nd edition). Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.
- Philip J (1969) *Researches in South Africa* (vols 1 & 2) (2nd edition). New York: Negro Universities Press.
- Pringle T (1827) Letters from South Africa. *New Monthly Magazine*, 19: 69–76.
- Radebe M (1990) uNongqawuse. In P Mtuze (ed) *Ugadla* (8th edition). Umtata: Shuter & Shooter.
- Read J (1818) Extracts from the narrative of the journey of Mr. Read and others to Caffraria. *Transactions of the Missionary Society to the Year 1817*, 4: 280–293.
- Rubusana W (ed) (1911) *Zemk'inkomo Magwalandini* (2nd edition). London: Butler & Tanner.
- Sandi N (1986) Hayi, uNongqawuse. In N Sandi & N Zamela, *Yehl' Intlekele!* Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
- Scheub H (1996) *The tongue is fire: South African storytellers and apartheid*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Sparrman A (1977) *A voyage to the Cape of Good Hope towards the Antarctic Polar Circle round the world and to the country of the Hottentots and the Caffres from the year 1772–1776* (vol. 2). (2nd edition). Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society.
- Stapleton T (1994) *Maqoma: Xhosa resistance to Colonial Advance 1798–1873*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.
- Thompson G (1962) *Travels & adventures in southern Africa* (2nd edition). Cape Town: African Connoisseurs Press.
- Umhlab' unotuli (1898) Imbali Ze Nkosi. *Imvo Neliso Lomzi*, 20 January: 3.
- Van der Merwe P (1995) *The migrant farmer in the history of the Cape Colony 1657–1842* (2nd edition). Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Vilikazi B (1965) *Inkondlo kaZulu* (4th edition). Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Wauchope I (1908) *The natives and their missionaries*. Lovedale: Lovedale Press.
- Yalimanisi D (1980) uNongqawuse. In S Satyo (ed) *Elugayini*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

# Women and gender in the South African War, 1899–1902

ELIZABETH VAN HEYNINGEN

The gendered character of the South African War has operated at two levels – both then and now the war has been seen almost entirely as a masculine experience. For the British in 1899, women had no place in war. Women were at best a useful propaganda tool, like the Uitlander (foreigner or outsider) refugees, touted as victims of a callous enemy in a war for justice and equity (Cammack 1990; van Heyningen 1984). In a pioneering work Jacklyn Cock has argued that war is a ‘gendering experience’:

It [war] both uses and maintains the ideological construction of gender in the definitions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. Women are widely cast in the role of ‘the protected’ and ‘the defended’, often excluded from military service, and almost always...excluded from direct combat. Dividing the protector from the protected, defender from defended, is crucial to both sexism and militarism. (1991: x)

It is in the nature of conflict to create stereotypes, to formulate the enemy as ‘the other’ and the sufferers on the home side as ‘victims’. Only with more dispassionate reflection can the multiple stories, the layers of experience and the totality of war be uncovered (Cooke 1996, cited in Vietzen 1999). In the last 15 years, as the binaries of war – civilian and military, home front and war front, women as passive victims and men as defenders or aggressors – have become more obviously blurred, western feminist historians have begun to examine more subtly the way in which gender is constructed by and through war. Writing in 1990, the editors of *Gendering War Talk* observed that:

A culturally produced activity that is as rigidly defined by sex differentiation and as committed to sexual exclusion as is war points to a crucial site where meanings about gender are being produced, reproduced, and circulated back into society. After biological reproduction, war is perhaps the arena where division of labor along gender lines has been the most obvious, and thus where sexual difference has seemed the most absolute and natural. The separation of ‘front’

and ‘home front’ has not only been the consequence of war but has also been used as its justification. (Cooke & Woollacott 1993: ix)

One reason why the literature on gender and war has evolved so slowly is that most academic writing on the subject, at least in English, has been the work of British and American historians. Neither country was invaded during either of the world wars of the twentieth century and, since the eighteenth century, only the Americans, during the civil war of the mid-nineteenth century, have had any experience of war fought on home ground. As a result, despite the horrors of conflict in twentieth century Europe, they have tended to see war as a relatively positive, empowering experience for women (Brayborn & Summerfield 1987; Marwick 1977). But the hostilities of the late twentieth century, the Bosnian war and the use of child soldiers in Africa, for instance, have forced western historians to reconsider their understanding of war. Women as soldiers, the use of rape as an instrument of war, the contribution of women to the war economy – all these features, and others, have led to a more complex exploration of gender and war.

The South African experience of war has been more neglected than most, despite our legacy of conflict and the huge body of military history which has been produced. In the latter half of the twentieth century other agendas have prevailed. For Afrikaners the history of Boer women has been deliberately constructed to serve the ends of Afrikaner nationalism (Brink 1990; Grundlingh 2002; Stanley 2006). On the Left, other issues, notably resistance to colonialism and apartheid, have been more important. Cooke and Woollacott (1993) suggest that violence is a primary analytical category in understanding the war experience. Yet this is not necessarily the case. For women across the spectrum in the South African War disempowerment, deprivation and disease were often more significant realities. At the same time, although it was disruptive, for a few war was positive; it could be occasionally exhilarating and, more rarely, offer fresh opportunities. But gendered experiences in South Africa play themselves out in a social context which is also penetrated by race and class divisions. Almost invariably the positive experiences were those of more affluent middle-class, white women. The working classes, black and white, starved most and lost more children. In addition, they are usually almost invisible in the record. Only rare fragments give us a glimpse of their lives, and these glimpses are often mediated through the eyes and voices of the middle class, be they well-intentioned philanthropists, *dominees* (ministers) and their wives, or unsympathetic doctors.

Almost all writing on women in the South African War has focused on the plight of the Boer women and children. Like the Uitlander refugees, Boer women are seen as victims of an unjust war; the emphasis has been on passive suffering, a historiographical trend which has continued into the present (Alberts 2005; Changuion et al. 2005; Coetzer 2000; Otto 1954, 2005; Raath 2003).<sup>1</sup> In a paper written at the time of the recent centenary Helen Bradford argued that Boer women should be seen in a more active role, as the real ‘*bitter-einders*’ ('bitter-enders' – Boers who refused to accept defeat) who urged their men to continue their fight. Such a view is not new but her contention that Boer

men should be seen as essentially domestic puts this argument into a fresh perspective, placing the Boer home at the centre of Boer social life (Bradford 2002). For the Boers the home front became the military front, both on the farms and in the camps. The British had hoped that the scorched earth policy would bring a speedy end to the war. However, not only did the camp women encourage their men to continue fighting, but the knowledge that the women were not left unprotected on the veld, and spared the task of caring for the families themselves, Boer men were able to remain on commando.

Ironically, political emphasis on the plight of the Boer women in the camps has stultified research on the camps themselves (van Heyningen 2005).<sup>2</sup> British women, so often enthusiastic jingoes, have attracted even less sympathy or interest except for Vietzen (1999) and van Heyningen and Merrett (2002). Only fairly recently have black men received attention but their women do not appear (Genge 2002; Kessler 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003; Mbenga 2002; Mohlamme 2001; Warwick 1983). That black women had a role to play in this war continues to be ignored; the impact of the war on their lives has received even less attention. More than this, the main records relating to their wartime experiences have been gutted, leaving only chance fragments with which to reconstruct their lives.<sup>3</sup> Yet war is a social phenomenon, a crisis which tells us a great deal about social attitudes and the way in which society functions under stress. Women, as fully as men, are part of the social condition and no study of war which obliterates them can be regarded as complete.

The greater part of this chapter focuses on the concentration camps, which have been the subject of remarkably little research. Parts of the sections dealing with the refugees, the siege towns and political change have been published previously (van Heyningen 1984, 1999, 2001, 2002a).

## The concentration camps

The concentration camps<sup>4</sup> were a profoundly gendered experience at almost every level. Women's camps<sup>5</sup> were run, not just by men, but by *military* men who were part of a male culture isolated from women and the world of women. Women's needs were little understood and were discounted. Not only was the removal from their homes, the focus of their authority in the family, disempowering, but in the camps their right to manage their lives was restricted by an authoritarian male dominance, by unfamiliar regulations and by the imposition of an alien culture, often promoted by an unsympathetic medical profession. Added to this, in the rhetoric of war the enemy were the 'other'; Boer women, regarded as unfeminine, as peasants, were contrasted with British femininity, fit subjects for the influence of British civilisation. Boer women, however, unlike the women in the black camps, were not silenced. In the camps they often expressed their anger loudly and vigorously. They recorded their experiences on paper, in diaries, letters, memoirs and sworn statements (Stanley 2006; van Heyningen 2005). Black women, on the other hand, offered no grist to the mill of wartime propaganda. In a racist

South Africa their affairs were of little interest, then or later, to the white keepers of records. Apart from a few statistics, their presence has been almost entirely expunged from the files.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the traumas of the twentieth century have largely erased popular memory of the camps amongst blacks. Their experience can often only be extrapolated from that of Boer women.

The earliest concentration camps, such as those in Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Pretoria, were unplanned – they were usually little more than an aggregation of displaced people who needed relief. As black locations became overcrowded, refugees spilled over into unplanned settlements on the fringes of the original town locations. For a considerable time the British authorities gave no thought to the future. Sir Alfred Milner (Lord Milner from 1901) and the military governors were intent upon establishing civilian rule; the relief of destitute families was usually a minor consideration. Eventually about 18 white camps were established in the Transvaal and another 13 in the Orange River Colony (ORC).<sup>7</sup> The early black camps were usually satellites to the white camps with a few exceptions such as Edenburg and Thaba 'Nchu in the ORC, which were entirely independent establishments. They were even more ad hoc in their origins than the white camps.

There were several reasons for the lack of planning, even after the scorched earth policy was formally launched by Lord Kitchener in early 1901. Although it was clear by May 1900 that the fall of Bloemfontein and Pretoria had not ended the conflict, the British still expected that the war would not last long. The need for forward planning was not raised for months. Second was the belief that Britain was acting extraordinarily generously by offering aid to the women and children of the enemy.<sup>8</sup> A third factor arose from the divided interests of the British authorities. Kitchener's only consideration was to end the war as rapidly as possible; civilians were not his concern. However, they were his responsibility for much of 1900 and the middle months of 1901, when Milner was in England. Kitchener left the administration of the camps to his subordinates, who took care not to disturb his peace of mind on the subject. Until November 1901 the War Office failed to pass critical statistical information to the Colonial Office which was, consequently, not fully informed of the rising mortality in the camps, despite the revelations of Emily Hobhouse (Spies 1977). There was also a tendency on the part of government politicians to disregard Hobhouse's disclosures as opposition 'noise', not to be given too much credence.

Thus, although the camps had nominally been handed over to civilian control in January 1901 (Spies 1977), the administration was still military: in the Transvaal Major-General JG Maxwell, Military Governor of Pretoria, held the reins, his subordinate being WK Tucker, a surveyor and the only civilian in the top ranks of the camp administration; in the ORC ultimate responsibility was that of Major HJ Goold-Adams, while the camp administration was in the hands of Captain Arthur Trollope, a relatively low-level military man seconded to the civil administration. These men, especially Maxwell who had Kitchener's ear, were concerned primarily with defending their turf and protecting

their reputations. They told their masters what they wanted to hear – that there were no real problems in the camps, that the inmates were content, that the rising mortality was merely the result of a passing childhood epidemic. When they had to admit that there was a problem, they blamed the Boers themselves. The highest civilian authority, Sir Alfred Milner, had little to do with the camps until his return to South Africa in November 1901, although he could hardly fail to have been aware of the growing outcry in the British press and Parliament. Once he decided to grasp the nettle, however, conditions changed rapidly and decisively.

It was left to the military men on the ground, then, to manage the crisis of 1901. Oblivious of the different needs of women and children, military standards were applied to the organisation of the camps. Bell tents were expected to house 15 soldiers, therefore they should house 15 civilians, even though soldiers were constantly on the move and had few possessions, while families lived in the tents for months with their household possessions. It did not occur to military men, many of them unmarried, that the concentration of young children was a breeding ground for disease.

Food was supplied in the form of ration scales, similar to those used for the army, prisons, and comparable institutions. It is not clear who was responsible for drawing up the original scales, but a critical feature seems to have been the assumption that the energy needs of camp people were less than those of soldiers (or even prisoners) since they were not engaged in hard labour. The quantity of food for children was half that of adults and there was no regard for the special needs of babies and toddlers.<sup>9</sup> Cost was a critical consideration, with white refugees in the ORC rationed at nine pence a day and blacks at four pence halfpenny.<sup>10</sup> Originally there was also a punitive element in the Transvaal scales, with the families of men on commando receiving no meat, but this was abandoned as early as March 1901 (Cd 819; Spies 1977). The only nutritional elements in the rations were meat, flour,<sup>11</sup> salt and sugar. Even had the quality been good, on this diet declining health was inevitable.<sup>12</sup> In actual fact the meat, especially, was often inedible, lacking in fat, sometimes diseased, occasionally bad.<sup>13</sup> Black ration scales were even more inadequate. Meat was provided at the rate of only one pound per week for adults (compared with half a pound a day for whites) and the diet was heavily dependent on mealies. It is now recognised that it was exactly the kind of diet which contributed to pellagra.<sup>14</sup> From early on some doctors urged that children be provided with a more suitable diet but their requests were refused. ‘The scale of rations as already laid down cannot be altered,’ Trollope told Doctors Symonds and van der Wall in Kroonstad camp in February 1901. ‘If however young children are sick, they can be put on Hospital diet, and be supplied with milk, and what is necessary.’<sup>15</sup>

Male assumptions permeated much of the administration of the camps. Despite the numerical predominance of women and children, refugees were invariably referred to as ‘he’. Concern about the mischief-making potential of idle able-bodied men meant that work was provided for men, ranging from the hard labour of digging and trenching to working in carpenter shops, making boots and managing camp livestock. Since camp

work was paid, usually at the rate of one shilling a day, male-headed households were able to supplement their rations while those without working men were at a double disadvantage. Not only did they not have the additional income, women also had to do the heavy work of carrying water and fuel, sometimes over considerable distances. Almost the only women who were employed in the camps were the young women who worked in the hospitals as 'probationers'. As the camps became more sophisticated and sports were introduced, along with schools, again the emphasis was on games for boys. Cricket bats and balls, rugby balls and other such equipment was purchased. Girls were not entirely precluded from sports and tennis courts were built in some camps, but their needs were rarely mentioned in the camp reports.

By November 1901 it had become obvious to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, and to the High Commissioner, now Lord Milner, that urgent changes were needed in the camps. In the process the camps became increasingly 'Indianised', medicalised and feminised. For the Colonial Office, which had taken over the full management of the camps from the War Office, the obvious source of men skilled in the management of civilian camps was the Indian Medical Service (IMS), which had operated in plague camps in the previous decade. Colonel JS Wilkins (in the ORC) and Lieutenant-Colonel SJ Thomson (in the Transvaal), both military doctors, were recruited from the IMS and they introduced into the camp administration a number of fellow IMS recruits.<sup>16</sup> Their salaries, at £1 000 per annum, were strikingly larger than those of the previous incumbents who had had to shoulder the burden of the worst months. It is not clear, though, that their presence made much difference to the camps. Their main focus was on sanitation, where improvements had been largely achieved by 1902 anyway. They did, however, relieve Milner from the day-to-day responsibility of the camps. The black camps had already, by May 1901, been put into the hands of a Canadian officer, Major GF de Lotbiniere, who had a similar background in the Indian plague camps.

In the early months of the camps there were few trained medical personnel and more were not easily recruited from South Africa, in wartime, when the army attracted most skilled professionals. Doctors in the camps were usually part-time, local district surgeons or drawn from the Royal Army Medical Corps serving nearby military camps. There was also a shortage of qualified nurses in South Africa, where there was still little formal training available. A handful were recruited from the Uitlander refugees living at the coast. Mrs Bullen, who had been in Springfontein camp almost from its inception, typified the position of many of the medical staff who worked in the camps during the crisis of 1901. She resigned at the end of 1901, broken in health.<sup>17</sup>

A first step in improving the health of the camps was the decision to recruit trained nurses in Britain. The large-scale employment of women in this way was an indication of the extent to which middle-class women's labour had become socially acceptable. Advertisements in the British press had a considerable response and some hospitals must have been almost denuded of staff. Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, for instance, lost



Camp staff had little more comfort than the burgher inmates. Here they are re-erecting their tents after they had blown down in a storm.

five nurses at one time. Eventually about 100 trained nurses went to the ORC camps and as many to the Transvaal. Surviving application forms indicate the broad profile of these nurses. Most came from middle-class homes, the daughters of businessmen, farmers or, occasionally, of clergymen; one or two had medical fathers. None was very young; most were between about 28 and 35 years of age. Most were unmarried although there was the occasional widow amongst them. They came to South Africa for a variety of reasons. One or two had brothers serving in the British army; a few had travelled abroad before and probably came to South Africa out of a sense of adventure and a desire to see the world. The overwhelming reason, however, seems to have been financial. The salaries these nurses had earned in Britain were paltry – none earned more than £40 a year. In the camps they were offered £10 a month, while matrons received £12, with board and lodgings supplied, and free passages to and from South Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Life in the camps was hard. The nurses' accommodation was less crowded than that of the Boer families, but they lived in the same tents, threadbare and prone to collapse in the wind and rain. They received the same rations although they were allowed to supplement the food with 'medical comforts' – rice, jam and butter, for instance – but they could not get fresh fruit and vegetables either. The work was hard although the use of black orderlies relieved them of some of the more unpleasant tasks. Because they spoke no Dutch, they had difficulty communicating with their patients, with the result that their intentions were often misunderstood. Stress manifested itself in various ways.

Drunkenness was a problem from the first, especially since alcohol was widely used as a ‘medical comfort’ for the patients.<sup>19</sup> Exhaustion probably made the nurses more vulnerable to infection and substantial numbers contracted typhoid fever; at least two died in the service of the camps. And they quarrelled, over status, over salaries and over perceived slights or maltreatment.

At Brandfort camp Nurse Wood was ‘constantly knocking up, persisting in working when unfit to do so, with the result that she is confined to bed for days together’.<sup>20</sup> But Nurse Wood’s ongoing problems suggest other coping mechanisms. A couple of months later the doctor reported that she had had to go to Bloemfontein to see a dentist. ‘She is a very good nurse, but it is my duty to inform you that on more than one occasion I found her under the influence of liquor,’ he told the chief superintendent.<sup>21</sup> Nurse Allen at Heilbron was another problem. Doctor Tregaskis begged that she be found employment elsewhere. He had nothing to say against the work she did, he explained. It was rather her mode of doing it. ‘Her chief fault lies in an unhappy knack of rubbing people including patients the wrong way. When she went on leave and there was no more of her “continual and needless scoldings”, it was a great relief not to have to pour oil on troubled waters daily.’<sup>22</sup>

Friction between nurses was a regular problem. Nurses Hunter and Headland at Aliwal North asked that Nurse McLeod be removed. The reason is not given but Nurse McLeod defended herself indignantly, declaring that false reports had been made of her, that she had been left without guidance when she first arrived and it was purely accidental that she had failed to clean soiled beds. Both the children concerned were quite old enough to ask for the necessaries of life, and ‘to treat them as babies never occurred to my mind’. She was prepared to take her ‘unjust dismissal’ to court. Unfortunately she already had a bad record from Bloemfontein camp. There she had left her patients without reporting and had been a careless nurse. Moreover, her conduct had been ‘rather suspicious’ as she constantly allowed the ‘drunken dispenser Mr Kerr in her tent’ when she was in bed at night. In her turn, Nurse McLeod claimed that Dr Pern had picked the lock containing delicacies for the patients and had carried off eggs and liquor. The point here is not to highlight the deficiencies of the nurses, most of whom performed admirably, but to draw attention to the human responses to the hardships which they encountered.<sup>23</sup>

Few of these British nurses remained in South Africa after the war; even those who wished to do so found it difficult to obtain work in an overcrowded postwar market. Possibly a more important legacy of the camp hospitals in the long term was the use of probationers, young Boer women who were employed in the hospitals as assistants. These young women did not indicate why they were willing to do such work but they may well have done so for a variety of motives. They were paid, at the rate of between one shilling and two shillings and six pence a day; they received additional rations in the form of ‘medical comforts’; they could serve their people by ameliorating the alien and harsh atmosphere of the hospitals; and the work relieved some of the monotony of

camp life. The British doctors responded to them in various ways – probably a better indication of their own prejudices than the quality of the probationers. Doctor Kendall Franks complained in his inspection report that, ‘They are very slow and difficult to train. They do not take kindly to hard or disagreeable work, and are not particular in the matter of cleanliness’ (Cd 819: 331). Dr Pern in Bloemfontein camp, on the other hand, believed that they were quick at learning.<sup>24</sup>

In general, as the end of the war approached, doctors were inclined to view the young Boer women more favourably. Doctor Pratt Yule, the medical officer of health for the ORC, believed that most had entered the hospital service to vary the monotony of camp life and to earn a little money but, he noted, some had become interested in the work and were becoming extremely good nurses. ‘Many of these girls have little or nothing to look forward to when the time comes for the breaking up of the camp hospitals, and it is possible that a much better training could be gained in the Refugee Camps, provided the matter is taken in hand.’<sup>25</sup> Pratt Yule drew up a syllabus and started formal classes in some of the camps, but the initiative foundered with the end of the war. Only a couple of young women continued their training in civilian hospitals. Nevertheless, the experience may well have begun to modernise nursing in the home, and contributed to the move of Afrikaans women into nursing in the postwar years (Marks 1994).

By the end of 1901 the situation in the camps had changed dramatically. Camps now had up to five full-time doctors and as many professional nurses, in addition to Boer volunteers. Doctors now earned between £500 and £800 a year (rather more than the camp superintendents), while nurses were paid £10 a month, considerably more than most had been earning before. Salaries are indicative of status, and these doctors and nurses were accorded a new respect by the camp administration, contributing sometimes to clashes between personnel. Doctors increasingly laid down the law on the sanitary management of the camps, while professional nurses refused to share their mealtimes with Boer probationers. A hierarchy of authority was also established amongst the nurses, with matrons responsible not only for the administration of the hospital wards, but also for much of the management of the women in the camps.

For many of the Boer women the relationship between doctors and patients was extraordinarily disempowering. By the end of the nineteenth century, when the management of disease through public health measures such as clean water and effective sanitation had done much to reduce the huge mortality rate in industrial towns, the status of doctors had been considerably elevated. Doctors claimed, and were often accorded, the right to pontificate on a variety of topics, not necessarily medical (Deacon 1997; van Heyningen 1989). On the other hand, in the Boer home, the mother was the caregiver. Now, confronted by unfamiliar and intractable diseases, including the appalling *cancrum oris*, a complication of measles which resulted in a form of gangrene of the jaw and was usually fatal, they had little faith in British medicine. Tant Alie Badenhorst complained that the British doctor in the Klerksdorp camp was unable to help her ailing child. Eventually she obtained permission to send for her old ‘herb doctor’:

...as he had no diploma, he could not really take doctor's work, but he doctored the Kaffirs. He had, anyhow, twice saved Wollie from death...and I clung fast to him as my last straw...Well, Mr Steyn gave the child a powder and ten minutes after that he was damp with sweat and we could hope. (Badenhorst 1923: 239)

Maria Fischer was equally dubious about the efficacy of British medicine: '*Ek het die doktor ingeroep om moeilikheid te voorkom, maar ek was bang om sy medisyne te gebruik. Ons gebruik die gewone huismiddels...*' (I called in the doctor to avoid trouble, but I was afraid to use his medicines. We use the ordinary household remedies) (Fischer 1964: 44).

Doctors became a major focus of the women's resentment, sometimes with good reason. The Brandfort doctor seems to have been a thoroughly dishonest man, while three doctors in Bethulie camp were dismissed at one time for drunkenness and sexual peccadilloes (Cd 893; Fischer 1964). Above all, however, doctors in the early twentieth century had few therapies for the multitude of ailments which beset the camp inmates. Enteric fever could be limited by vigilant sanitary controls and an 'antitoxin' existed for diphtheria. Apart from that, western medicine offered little more than traditional Boer remedies could. It was not surprising that the women often hid their sick children from the doctors to prevent their hospitalisation where they believed the children were starved and neglected. For Boer women this war involved a violent modernisation of a pre-industrial social ethos, which greatly enhanced the bitterness of conflict and defeat (van Heyningen 2002).

Over time the controversy about the camps came to be seen as a 'women's issue'; not only was it about women, it was about male versus female styles of aid – impersonal, masculine relief versus feminine personalised philanthropy. For men like Milner, relief meant work for unemployed men, both on the Poor Law principle that the poor should work for their relief, and because idle men, 'loafers', were regarded as potentially mischief-making. Aid for women was incidental to this primary objective. On the other hand, philanthropy, although it had become increasingly professional and depersonalised in Britain by the late nineteenth century, was traditionally women's work. Thus Lady Hobhouse, Emily Hobhouse's aunt, wrote to the War Office in October 1900, inquiring about relief for women and children and offering assistance.<sup>26</sup>

It was this interest which led to Emily Hobhouse's visit to South Africa and her condemnation of the camps (Spies 1977). But it was the style of her investigations, as much as the matter, which set her apart from the male administrators whom she encountered. In one of the few perceptive studies of Emily Hobhouse, Liz Stanley has noted that for Major Goold-Adams, lieutenant-governor of the ORC, the problem with Hobhouse and the South African Women and Children's Distress Fund was their 'personal sympathy' for the Boer women. 'He believed that gifts could be dealt out in a machine-like routine...I said I could not work like that, I must treat people like fellow creatures, and share their troubles. He believed this unnecessary' (Stanley 2005: 73). In

the suspicious atmosphere of wartime South Africa, sympathy for the enemy was regarded as disloyal at the very least.<sup>27</sup>

The most striking evidence for this feminisation of the camps was the War Office appointment of a 'Ladies' Commission' in mid-1901 to investigate conditions there. The neglect of the history of the camps has meant that the Ladies' Commission has been almost entirely ignored. Little has been published on the reasons for the decision of the War Office to appoint a commission of women to investigate conditions in the camps. It was probably because the British authorities had also come to see the camps as a 'women's issue' that the War Office made its path-breaking decision to appoint a commission of ladies to investigate camp conditions. Paula Krebs has noted:

The appointment of the Fawcett Commission to investigate the camps was truly a remarkable move on the part of the War Secretary. Never before had there been a government commission, official or unofficial, made up entirely of women, let alone a commission led by a suffragist. The appointment of the commission, and the action taken in response to its (and, uncredited, Emily Hobhouse's) recommendations, testifies not only to the changing status of women in public life but also to the increasing priority of women's issues in public discourse, especially to the press. (1999: 78)

From the War Office perspective, not only would these women subvert Hobhouse's feminisation of the camp problems, but they would offer the modern woman's solution to them. The hostile presentation of the commission in Afrikaner literature on the camps, as little more than a whitewash, has been widely accepted. In fact, most of the women on the commission had an impeccable record in social and medical work and in the care of women in particular.<sup>28</sup> The head of the commission, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, was a leading figure in the women's suffrage movement, and had considerable experience in government administration as the amanuensis for her blind husband, when he was Postmaster General in WEG Gladstone's Liberal government (Strachey 1931).

Although camp superintendents were sometimes inclined to dismiss the criticisms of the Ladies' Commission, Chamberlain and Milner took their reports seriously and forced their subordinates to do likewise. Some changes were already under way by the time their report was published, but it was the Ladies' Commission which instigated improvements in the diet – above all fresh vegetables, a soup kitchen for the children, and more appropriate food for infants. They also ensured that all the camp inmates had beds, and that the camps were reduced in size by sending several thousand families to the coast in Natal and the Cape (Cd 893).

The changes which occurred at the beginning of 1902 included a shift in mental attitude of the authorities to the inmates. Some of the camp staff took considerable pride in their achievements, to the extent that they began to regard the camps as semi-permanent training grounds for these new British subjects. Dr Pratt Yule, the medical officer of health for the ORC, established a formal curriculum of lectures and classes for



This photograph was typical of the formal, posed portrayals sent to anxious menfolk in the prisoner-of-war camps. The family are represented as respectably middle class with all the accoutrements of dress, crockery and maidservant. Since blacks in white camps were not rationed, a young woman like this was entirely dependent on her white family for food. Consequently, it was probably only those Boers of substance who could afford to keep black workers.



At first glance this photograph suggests the same middle-class representation as the previous one. It is, however, the family of J Brink, the superintendent of Vredefort Road camp. The young woman at the back, standing in a subservient position, is clearly a domestic worker, rather than part of the family.

the Boer probationers in the hospitals. He hoped to issue them with certificates which would enable them to use the training in the future. The plan was only partially implemented when the war ended and the camps gradually broke up. A couple of young women accepted the offer to continue their training in the new colony.<sup>29</sup>

Black women, by contrast, are almost completely silent in the white concentration camps' records although there were, probably, a hundred or more in most camps. Neither their position in the camps, nor their fate, is at all clear. Probably all came in with white families, as domestic workers or as 'adopted' children. In Pietersburg camp they are nameless, their presence recorded along with the livestock brought into the camp. In the Nylstroom camp their names were recorded but the relevant pages have been removed (see endnote 6). Almost uniquely, the Aliwal North camp register listed two black children as members of the Swanepoel family.<sup>30</sup> Yet, ironically, black inmates of the white camps are visible for they were often photographed with their white 'families', both in formal photographs, sent to menfolk in the prisoner-of-war camps, and in the work context.

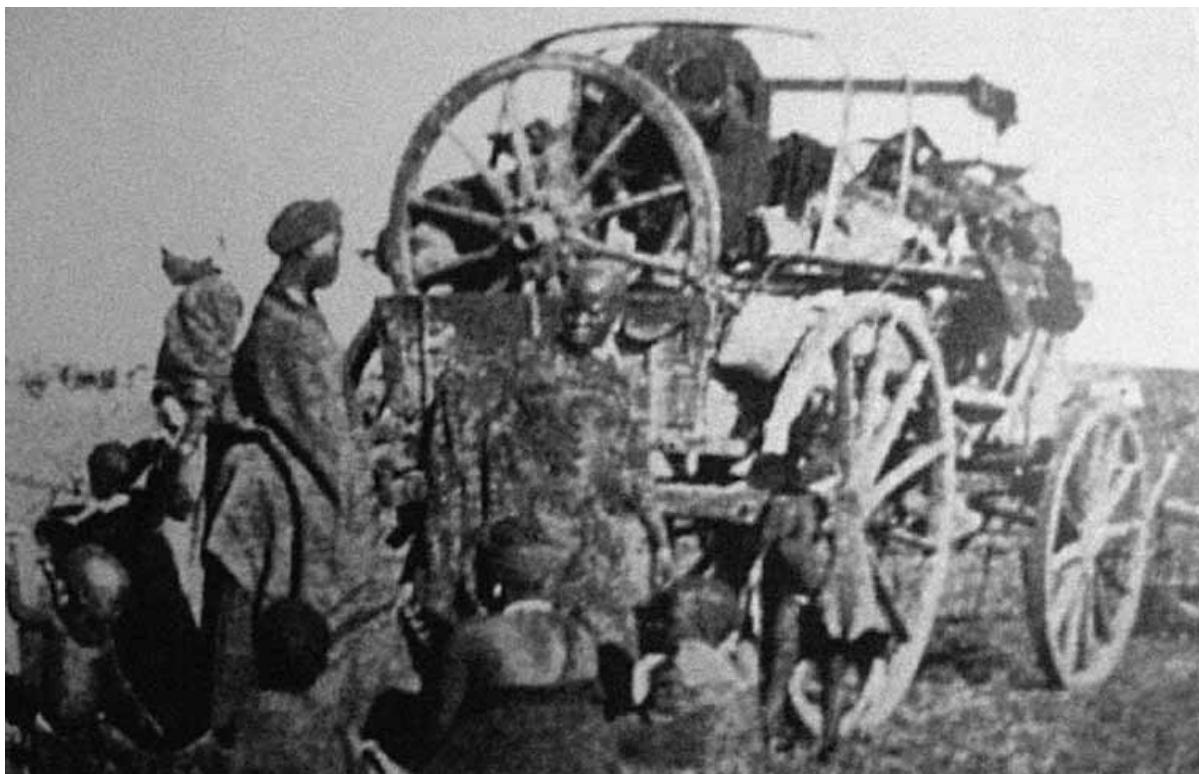
Only a handful of black people were in the white camps. Far more numerous were the families in the black camps. While at first some were satellites to the white camps, Edenburg, a labour depot, had an independent black camp. In Thaba 'Nchu, rather than establishing a formal camp, a settlement area was created, with grazing for cattle. Everywhere accommodation was so poor and food so deficient that mortality rates probably rocketed, long before the epidemics started in the white camps.



This young woman from Bloemfontein camp is posed with her employer. Washing, hauling wood and carrying water – the traditional tasks of black women – were the hardest work the women had to perform in the camps.

An early report of Edenburg camp noted there were about 700 people there, evacuated mainly from Jagersfontein and Fauresmith and consisting mainly of old men, women and children. Few had money to pay for food. Shelter consisted of 26 sail covers provided by the army, or sacks stretched over a framework of sticks. Food was issued at one pound of mealies and half an ounce of salt a day, and one pound of meat once a week, although it is by no means certain that everyone received this meagre allowance.<sup>31</sup> By April 1901 the population of the Edenburg camp had risen to over 2 000, half of them children, living in 'slightly built wigwams covered with sacking'. The high death rate amongst the children, as early as April 1901, well before the death rate in the white camps had begun to increase, was attributed to the negligence of the mothers. 'Natives do not seem to care for their children till they reach a useful age,' reported J Daller, one of the travelling inspectors. What data has survived suggests that infants perished of bronchitis and pneumonia in the hard winter of 1901, before they could be attacked by measles.<sup>32</sup>

About May 1901 a 'Native Refugee Department' was established under Major GF de Lotbiniere, a Canadian serving with the Royal Engineers. A major consideration was to ensure a regular supply of labour to the British army. De Lotbiniere proposed that the inmates of the new camps should be supplied with the means of cultivating crops, thus supporting themselves and economising on the cost of maintaining the black camp residents. New camps were established on deserted farms along the railway lines, under the protection of the British army. Here crops of mealies and sorghum, as well as potatoes, pumpkins, other vegetables and green forage were sown. By the end of the war there were 29 such camps in the ORC and 37 in the Transvaal. As most of the material on these camps has been destroyed, information is fragmentary. The statistical returns



A black family preparing for evacuation to the camps.

suggest that mortality was fairly low, but there is no reason to believe that blacks survived better than whites.<sup>33</sup>

Like white women, black women lost homes, livestock and other possessions as a result of the military sweeps. A few claimed compensation, giving us a glimpse of a handful of individuals and their lives. Rose from Bethlehem had lost 14 bags of grain. Sanna, who had lived on the farm of D Swart, and whose husband was in Natal, claimed for 27 bags of grain. Lear, Selena and Sara, all from Mooiplaats, between them claimed for three cattle and 17 horses while Diena at Paardenplaats listed four horses and two bags of grain.<sup>34</sup>

Life in the farm camps was a good deal more hazardous than official reports suggested. Although the camps were located next to railway lines where they were supposed to be protected from Boer depredations, British troops could also be destructive. In the Harrismith district British troops wantonly trampled over the mealie fields, destroying an entire crop, as well as helping themselves to pigs and fowls. At least 600 people were left destitute as a report on the episode noted:

The natives themselves admitted that such losses were incidental in War time. They also showed the fairest spirit of compromise and placed themselves entirely in our hands, stating at the same time, that they were ruined, and would have to fall on us for sustenance during the coming winter...As you know I have encouraged them to breed poultry, the chickens are coming on well, and would have been a great convenience to the European Community but this is now ruined for the season.<sup>35</sup>

There is other evidence to suggest that black camp inmates were often short of food. Gert Olifant and Daniel Marome of Honingspruit camp petitioned the camp authorities about the inadequacy of the food. 'We have to work hard all day long but the only food we can get is mealies and mealie meal and this is not supplied free but we have to purchase same with our own money. Meat we are not able to get at any price, nor are we allowed to buy anything at the shops at Honingspruit.'<sup>36</sup> Their requests were dismissed out of hand as the demands of men who were lazy and too independent.

While schools were never started in the black camps, church activity certainly existed. The minister of the Primitive Methodist Church, William Nathaniel Somngesi, who attended the people in the camps at Eensgevonden (Brandfort), Vet Rivier and Smaldeel in the ORC, noted with concern that the lack of a marriage officer led some people to live together as husbands and wives, 'thereby forfeiting their places in church membership'. The refugees, he noted, were not allowed to 'knock about the country' and could not, therefore, find an alternative marriage officer. Unlike the request for food, this concern was given serious attention and the plea attended to.<sup>37</sup> The camps may also have been fertile pastures for the newly emerging independent churches. Certainly the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which had begun to spread only recently through South Africa, was active in the camps, perhaps providing solace to women whose husbands were absent, and interest to relieve the monotony of camp life.<sup>38</sup>

Grief at the loss of children was a natural subject for poetry. The pro-Boer Olive Schreiner was one of the few to give voice to this emotion in English. Her *The Cry of South Africa* contained a lament which was, perhaps, particularly heartfelt, given the loss of her own child:

Give me back my dead  
Whom thou hast riven from me  
By arms of men loud called from earth's farthest bound  
To wet my bosom with my children's blood!  
Give me back my dead,  
The dead who grew up on me! (Rice 2004: 85)

As Afrikaners began the task of shaping and defining Afrikaner identity after the war, the events of the war were reworked in poetry and prose. Several of the women recorded their own experiences. Often these were straightforward accounts, like that of Hester Magrieta van Zyl, who completed her '*lied*' (song) on 28 March 1902:

*Ik moet nu gaan verhaal  
Wat gebeur is in Transvaal  
Dit om ons lege land  
In die koude julie maand  
ons was nog in ons huis  
Toe kom die Troeps gedruis  
Eers by die water sloot  
Maak hul die pluim vee dood<sup>39</sup>*

I must now tell you  
What happened in Transvaal  
This in our empty land  
In the cold month of July  
we were still in our house  
When the Troops rushed in  
First by the water course  
They killed all the fowls

At a more sophisticated level, many poems of the early postwar language movement drew directly or indirectly on the deaths in the camps. Jan FE Cellier's '*Die Brand*' used the metaphor of the bleak natural environment of winter to emphasise the isolation and loneliness of women in the war (Opperman 1950: 35–6): In his *Vrede-Aand (Peace Night)* Louis Leipoldt mourned the suffering mother of the camps (Grove and Harvey 1962: 56–59):

*Dis vrede, man; die oorlog is verby!  
Sien jy die strate vol? Ek sien 'n ramp,*

'n Kerkhof by 'n konsentrasiekamp  
Met duisend graffies, elk waarvan bewaar  
'n Skat wat alles was wat God aan haar  
Gegewe het om eenmaal aan ons land,  
In tyd van nood, toe te vertrou as pand!  
Sy was die sterkste van ons almal—sy  
Wat met gebed en hoop kon samestry!  
Sy het die swaarste deel van onse lot  
Gedra, gehelp, getroos, gesteun deur God;  
En as jy daaraan dink, dan moet jy glo—  
Al twyfel jy—daar is tog Iemand bo  
Wat so 'n vrou tot yster maak en staal,  
Met soveel troos haar steun en hoop betaal;  
Maar dan weer dink jy aan haar smart en aan  
Die graffies wat daar op die kerkhof staan,  
En voel weer twyfel, want 'n mens is swak!  
Waarom het Hy die boom gesnoei, die tak  
So afgekap tot aan die stam? Waarom  
Het hy haar lot so skeef gemaak en krom?  
Nee, boetie, drink met my; skreeu saam met my:  
Dis vrede nou; die oorlog is verby!

It's peace now, man, at last the war is over!  
You see the crowded streets? I see a swamp,  
A churchyard near a concentration camp  
With thousands of small graves and in each grave  
A treasure which was all God to her gave,  
That she might it one day in forfeit cede  
To our dear country in its time of need!  
She was the strongest of us all out there  
Who fought along with us with hope and prayer,  
She bore the heaviest burden, onward led,  
By God supported, helped and comforted.  
And when you come to think of it it's clear,  
In spite of doubts, there must be One up there  
Who makes a woman iron, her courage steeling,  
Rewarding strength and hope with comfort healing,  
But, then again, you think about her pain,  
And those small graves that litter all the plain,  
And once again you doubt, for man is weak!  
Why did He prune this tree and leave it bleak,  
The limbs chopped back right to the trunk? And why

Was her fate made so crooked and so wry?  
 No, no, my boy, let's drink and raise a cheer:  
 The war is over now and peace is here!

More unusually, Eugene Marais remembered the lost children in *Die Oorwinners* (The Conquerors), written at the side of the children's graves in Nylstroom camp cemetery (Marais 1956: 74-75):

*Oorwinnaars vir ons volk,  
 bly u vir al wat beste in ons is 'n ewig' tolk;  
 nooit weer sal vyands voet u stof so diep vertrap en smoor  
 dat ons u langer nie kan sien—en hoor.  
 Nie onse Helde, wat die magtig' leer  
 op glansryk' velde kon weerstaan en keer;  
 nie onse Seuns, wat aan die galg en teen die muur  
 die diepe liefde vir hul eie moes verduur;  
 nie onse Moeders, wat met bloeiend' hart en seer,  
 in swart Gethsemané die ware smart moes leer;  
 nie onse Generals, vereer met krans en riddersnoer;  
 —was waardig vir ons volk die hoge stryd te voer en te oorwin.  
 Nie ons, met vuile hand en hart ontrou was waardig om die vaandel hoog te hou.  
 Maar u, o bleke spokies, in U kermend', klagend' wee,  
 staan voor ons ewiglik beskermend—uit die lang verlee.*

Conquerors for our people ye,  
 For all the best in us interpreters to be;  
 That foot of foe too deep your dust should trample down, ye need not fear;  
 We still shall see you—still shall hear.  
 'Tis not our Heroes, who on glorious field  
 The mighty army met, and would not yield;  
 'Tis not our Sons, who died by hangman's knot,  
 And for the deep love of their own were shot;  
 'Tis not our Mothers, who with bleeding heart and sore  
 In black Gethsemane their dark hour must endure;  
 'Tis not our Leaders, brave with wreath and knightly fame;  
 —It was not these who led the fight for our people and won the victory.  
 'Tis not ourselves, false-hearted and foresworn,  
 Who truly have on high the standard borne.  
 But ye, pale ghosts, who in your piteous, painful woe,  
 Our saviours stand for ever—long and long ago.

## British loyalists

Although life in the concentration camps was particularly harsh, suffering was not confined to the women of the Boer republics during the South African War. The first women to feel the impact of war were the Uitlanders – the non-burgher families living and working primarily on the Rand. While many of the wealthier families were able to leave before the war started, poorer families could not afford the fares to the coast. When war broke out, they were rounded up, packed into cattle trucks and shipped out of the republics. Most moved to coastal towns like Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth, where they struggled to eke out a living. Their plight was publicised by the British authorities who presented the Uitlander refugees as the innocent victims of Boer brutality. A British-based Mansion House Fund and local relief funds provided some aid but the long war years were nevertheless a bleak period for many. At the end of the war they returned to homes which had been vandalised or destroyed, and it was probably years before working-class women found their feet again (van Heyningen 1984).

The confinement and food shortages in the siege towns of Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking probably made life there similar to that in the camps. Nevertheless, the experiences differed considerably. Ladysmith, which was besieged for the shortest time, had a large number of soldiers in the town. Negotiations with the Boers resulted in a civilian camp, as well as a military hospital, established at Ntombi, just outside the town. Few women, therefore, remained in Ladysmith itself and women viewed the siege from the sidelines. Conditions at Ntombi were uncomfortable and occasionally dangerous, but women had little active role to play.

In Kimberley, where there was a greater shortage of military men, civilian males were recruited into the town guard. As a result, many women had husbands, sons or brothers engaged in the defence of the town. Moreover, in Kimberley women were active in the economy, particularly as teachers and nurses. When parents fled the vulnerable town at the start of the war, or kept their children at home as the shelling became dangerous, the income of teachers was jeopardised, like that of 'Bess', who was left penniless when her pupils disappeared (van Heyningen 1999).<sup>40</sup> Cecil John Rhodes, head of De Beers Mining Company which owned much of Kimberley, and his cronies lived comfortably throughout the siege but working-class families suffered severe hunger, queuing for long hours in the hot sun for incompetently distributed rations. Black families were evicted from their homes on the outskirts of the town, where they were most vulnerable to shelling, and struggled to find adequate housing (Meyer 1999).

Mafeking was besieged for a full seven months (van Heyningen 2001). The town was tiny and the military force completely inadequate so that almost everyone, male and female, black and white, had a value in the defence. Unlike either of the other sieges, the lives of black and white women were interwoven and the harsh divisions of South African society blurred.

This is not to say that stereotypical attitudes regarding women's place in war did not exist. The British newspaper correspondents tended to promote negative stereotypes of women in the context of war. JE Neilly (1900: 24) of the *Pall Mall Gazette* considered the Mafeking women to be 'a terrible incubus', draining limited resources, eating much-needed rations, creating unwanted additional labour running the laager – the camp on the outskirts of the town established for women – incubating disease, quarrelling with one another and making still more work for the men who had to pacify them. In contrast, for many of the Mafeking residents, women represented cherished and civilised family values; memories of home were evoked in times of stress: Charles Weir disliked night guard duty because in the quiet 'my mind reverts to our position and to the loved ones elsewhere' (Weir 1901: 51). Samuel Cawood's thoughts turned to his wife and children when the strain of the shelling brought on nightmares (Davey 1983). Sol Plaatje, who had imbibed so many male colonial values, celebrated all his family anniversaries – the birthdays of his wife and son, their wedding anniversary – in absentia. On Christmas Day he felt the absence of his wife deeply, while the gifts given to the children of the *stadt*, as the Barolong town was known, reminded him of:

...a little fellow far away, who enjoys whatever he gets at the expense of the comfort of a bewildered young mother, deserving a Christmas box from his father but unable to get it. It squeezed out of my eyes a bitter tear...Surely providence has seldom been so hard on me. (Plaatje 1999: 76)

Many white women in Mafeking had been evacuated before the siege started. Most of those who remained were moved into the Women's Laager, in theory because they were safer there. In fact conditions were harsh, resembling those of the concentration camps. Not only was the laager regularly shelled by the Boers, but the accommodation, mainly tents and wagons, was overcrowded and very hot in the Mafeking summer. Within days the children were suffering from ophthalmia or fever (Algie nd; Bottomley 1997; Craufurd 1900–01). By the middle of December 27 children had expired (Cock 1974: 53; Gwynne 1996: 17; Ross 1980: 69). Conditions became much worse when the shelling started. Women spent hours in dark and cramped conditions in a hastily built trench through Mafeking's blistering summer heat. Huddled together 'like swine', the women found it difficult to maintain decent sanitary conditions. 'So foul did the place become that many of the respectable inhabitants left it, preferring to risk shell and bullet in the town to living in such beastly surroundings' (Neilly 1900: 204).

In an increasingly segregationist South Africa, there was no attempt, however, to separate black from white in the laager. Here one could see 'the dusky brethren in all shades, from coal black graduating in purity to the white' (Cowan 1995: 12.10.1899). Nor was there any division by class. The inhabitants ranged from black domestic servants to their employers who included, on the one hand, a coloured woman, Mrs Graham,<sup>41</sup> and sedate Mrs Sarah Gwynne, both quietly patriotic, to Mrs Hammond, her sister Mrs Poulton, and the Delpouts, all vociferously anti-British, on the other. Distinctions were

blurred in other parts of the town as well. Mrs Patrick Sidzumo, the wife of the Mafeking court messenger, who was of Mfengu origin, had her house in the Fingo Location, but was expected to remain in the Barolong *stadt* during the shelling. When she was mortally injured in her own home, the resident magistrate, Charles Bell, commented, with some sympathy despite his dry words, 'These women are supposed to remain in the Stadt; but like most women they won't do as they are told; they persistently chance their luck and do not appear to comprehend the danger there is of their being hit' (Bell nd: 54; Plaatje 1999: 59). But life in the Barolong *stadt* was also much more hazardous than it was in the town or in the Women's Laager. The rocky terrain of the *stadt*, sloping down to the river, provided some natural shelter but, without trenches, more black women than whites were killed by shelling.

Siege life in Mafeking challenged conventional stereotypes. Courage was conventionally regarded as a masculine virtue and fear a feminine weakness (Neilly 1900). The varied responses of the Mafeking inhabitants to their first experience of shelling suggests that gender had little to do with their reactions. Some women behaved as convention dictated, with tears, shrieks or hysterics. The women at the convent were 'on their knees all day long', JR Algie, Mafeking's town clerk, noted dryly, while 'Miss Becker was very hysterical laughing and crying all day long' (Algie nd: 11). But then, some men were also afraid. The convent's chaplain, Father Ogle, ran away to pray with the nurses, Ina Cowan commented tartly (Cowan 1995: 17.10.1899). Other men were even more pusillanimous.

Some of the men were so frightened that it was with difficulty that they could be persuaded to come out of the trenches. One man, well known, disappeared down his well, while another, with a few War Correspondents, took refuge with some ladies in a cellar. A man credited with lots of pluck has got a huge Red Cross on his arm, a kind of talisman, perhaps, he thought, to ward off the shells. When chaffed about being a nurse he got furious. (Saunders 1996: 92)

On the other hand, many women showed considerable courage in the face of enemy fire. Indeed, a handful, like civilian nurse Ina Cowan, were exhilarated by the experience. 'There are heaps of funny things happening, and if it were not so exciting and solemn it would be the best experience one could have.' When the firing started she could not resist trying to see what was happening. 'The Red Crosses and several refugees, ran down to the river with us, where Captain Hepworth put up a galvanized iron place capped by numerous sandbags...Another girl and myself had a burning curiosity, so we climbed up the river bed to Mrs Minchin's house' (Cowan 1995: 09.10.1899, 16.10.1899). 'Cool that!' Algie commented admiringly (Algie nd: 11).

As the siege bit, women drew on other reserves of courage. To some extent everyone became inured to the shelling, which was one of the reasons why so many women returned to their own houses. But men occasionally expressed surprise at their resilience. In describing one of the many miraculous escapes, Edward Ross, a photographer and one of the town's best-known diarists, commented:

The ladies I must say are very plucky, in fact too plucky, and should be kept down more. One would imagine this sort of thing would collapse the nerves of women entirely, but they all kept up wonderfully well, and trot out on Sundays as smiling as ever. (Ross 1980: 167)

For most women in Mafeking the long, monotonous days were passed with the usual round of domestic chores – tending children, preparing meals, church attendance on Sundays when the Boers did not shell. But it was in the hospitals that a few Mafeking women carved out an independent space for themselves. Before the war the little hospital had three professional nurses; once the siege started the Sisters of Mercy, a teaching order whose school was closed down, also turned to nursing. Other female volunteers joined the nursing staff. Since the hospitals employed black domestic workers and orderlies, these ‘ladies’ did not have to perform the more unpleasant duties which were the lot of nurses elsewhere. Given the small number of doctors in the town and the fact that they were largely preoccupied with military duties, the women also had an unusually free hand in the day-to-day running of the hospitals. This sometimes led to clashes.

The reasons for the conflict are not clear but it seems likely that these volunteers, of whom the most prominent was Miss Friend, previously the music teacher at the Mafeking public school, were unaccustomed to the severe discipline of late-nineteenth century nursing; nor were they as subservient to the doctors as nurses of the day customarily were. The doctors did not respond well to this independence, commenting critically on the volunteer nurses and sometimes quarrelling with them. The volunteer nurses also resented attempts to curb their recreational activities. ‘We are volunteers, who have, for weeks past, most willingly nursed our sick & wounded to the best of our ability, from seven in the morning till nine or half past at night,’ Miss Friend told Colonel Vyvyan when they were reprimanded ‘gruffly’ by Doctor William Hayes for singing around the piano when they were off duty. ‘Naturally we feel the strain of the life since we are unused to it, and if we are needlessly denied all recreation, we are afraid we shall not be able to continue our work.’<sup>42</sup>

## Women’s politics

The events which gave rise to the South African War heightened political awareness throughout South Africa, amongst women as well as men, black as well as white. South African women were politically immature compared with their sisters in colonies like New Zealand or in Britain. It took the trigger of imperially-minded British women to provide them with a justification for engaging in political action (van Heyningen 2002a).

Lady Edward Cecil followed her husband to South Africa. While he was tied up in military activity, in Cape Town she moved between pro-British South African circles

and those of Government House. In discussions with the people she met, including Sir Alfred Milner, she became convinced of the ‘completeness and comprehensiveness’ of the ‘Afrikaner plot’. British interests urgently needed strengthening amongst the civilian population in South Africa, she believed (Milner 1951: 151–2). To further this aim, Violet Cecil made a deliberate effort to cultivate Cape Town loyalist women whom she considered ‘keen and practical’. In Dorothea Fairbridge, who came from a long-established British family in Cape Town, she found an invaluable ally (Milner 1951). Together with other leading Capetonian women they established the ‘Guild of Loyal Women’ at the peak of Boer military success in early 1900.

Antoinette Burton makes the point that British feminism was forged in the context of Victorian and Edwardian imperialism. The ‘woman question’, she adds, ‘was as much about the public exercise of women’s moral authority as it was about the battle over political rights’ (Burton 1994: 33). British feminists had long argued that women acted as ‘moral agents’ in the life of the nation; as women they claimed a moral superiority which justified their participation in the political domain. This sense of mission was extended to the empire. British feminists shared the conviction of many of their male counterparts that Britain had a special genius for empire, bringing prosperity and civilisation to its colonies, with the gloss that women’s participation brought additional ethical dimensions (Burton 1994).

In South Africa this notion of women’s moral authority in public life was readily absorbed by colonial women, particularly when it was instilled by leading members of the Government House circle. Moreover, it had the advantage of being less divisive than the issue of suffrage (Burton 1994). The war thus offered loyalist women the first real opportunity to engage themselves politically and to speak out on public platforms without incurring male hostility. Not only was an expression of loyalty acceptable; women could argue that they brought special womanly gifts to reinforcing the bonds of empire and healing the wounds of war. They were the peacemakers who could ‘calm the troubled spirits and heal the broken hearts’.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the ‘noble and beloved Queen’ provided a ‘glorious example’ to women. If men were prepared to lay down their lives for her, women should also show their appreciation of those who were working ‘to strengthen and establish on the firmest foundations’ the queen’s rule throughout South Africa.<sup>44</sup>

A leading article in the local press also made the point that the Guild of Loyal Women was a means by which Cape women could express their political views ‘without at the same time incurring the odium, for odium it would be to many, of being regarded as Women Politicians’. The editor’s leading article encapsulated the gendered thinking which allowed women a political voice (provided that it was uncritical), while denying them the right to political power. Party politics was ‘narrow’, ‘puny’, ‘parochial’ and ‘petty’ compared with the breadth of guild principles. ‘By that rare natural intuition which is all their own, the women have seized upon the fundamental principles of loyalty and patriotism as the corner-stones of the new Temple of South African

Sisterhood, and they have by that means lifted the Guild far above the political organisations established by men for the promulgation of their party objects.<sup>45</sup>

The guild was commonly described as non-political but the principles laid out at the inaugural meeting were explicitly political: the maintenance of the Cape Colony as part of the British Empire; the supremacy of Great Britain throughout South Africa; and the drawing closer of ties between South Africa and all parts of the British Empire.<sup>46</sup> However hazy these objectives may have been, the formation of the Guild of Loyal Women clearly answered a need amongst loyalist women in South Africa. The speed with which the guild expanded throughout South Africa is suggestive of this desire. By June branches were springing up throughout the Cape Colony – in Stellenbosch, Paarl, Victoria West, Port Alfred, Queen's Town, Mossel Bay, amongst others. By July 1900 the Guild had over 3 000 members with branches in 42 towns and villages of the Cape Colony and moves were afoot to form branches in the ORC and Transvaal.<sup>47</sup> At the end of 1900 Natal had followed suit with a Pietermaritzburg branch formed on 15 November and a Durban branch by 27 November (Atteridge c1930: 6; *Natal Witness* 15, 27.11.1900).

By no means all pro-British women expressed themselves in such jingo terms. Colonial-born women were also developing a South African consciousness. Isabella Lipp, one of the few British women left in Johannesburg after the start of the war, cogitated on the effect of the war in creating a new nation. While she did not doubt the British cause, with the Boers she shared a dislike of the big capitalists. Above all, she believed that a new society must be forged by the war: ‘whatever the issues of this struggle may be, Boer and Briton will still have to work and live together,’ she observed.

I have the welfare of my country very much at heart, I am a South African first then a Briton, and though I think the Transvaal Boers have gone into this war on a wrong scent, I cannot blame them... May I live to see this miserable race feeling die out, and the Boer strength and British industry amalgamate and co-operate in developing and perfecting this grand beautiful country of ours – then not before may they together become the bright, beautiful Africander nation of Olive Schreiner.<sup>48</sup>

Such views encouraged some women to promote reconciliation at the end of the war. Georgiana Solomon, the widow of Cape liberal politician Saul Solomon, and Mrs Annie Botha, wife of the Boer general Louis Botha, together formed the Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouwe Federasie (SAVF; South African Women's Federation). In the apartheid era the SAVF was more representative of right-wing Afrikaner nationalism, but Solomon's goal was to provide support for destitute Boer women in the postwar period. Although a militant suffragette herself, she clearly recognised that ‘welfare feminism’ was more suited to the South African circumstances.

Cape Town, Stellenbosch and the small towns of the Western Cape Boland were home to the most organised groups of pro-Boer philanthropic women. Their network was constructed initially through women who came together to protest against the war

and to help the women and children of the concentration camps. Centred on the home of Mrs Marie Koopmans-de Wet, the circle included the wives of a number of leading Cape Afrikaners, along with a handful of English-speaking sympathisers.<sup>49</sup> On the fringes was Olive Schreiner, an articulate spokesperson for the pro-Boer cause but never an active organiser, and always too maverick in her views to fit in comfortably with conservative Afrikaner society (First & Scott 1980).<sup>50</sup> In the postwar years the Afrikaans women in this group formed the Afrikaner Christelike Vroue Vereniging (ACVV; Afrikaans Christian Women's Union), overtly a welfare organisation which was to be closely associated with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism (du Toit 1992). Like the SAVF, the ACVV was a proponent of welfare feminism, rarely offering a direct political challenge to males (du Toit 1996).

The limited evidence available suggests that war also sharpened the political consciousness of black women. Like their menfolk, black women at the Cape were aware that their slender liberties were threatened by Boer republicanism. In Calvinia they supported Abraham Esau in his defence of the town. On one occasion at least, they saw the war as a more positive force. At the Moravian mission station of Elim in the Cape, Martha Jantjies led a brief messianic movement which envisaged a new order in which, amongst other desires, taxes would be abolished, Germans would be replaced by Anglican clergy and taverns would be opened (Nasson 1991).

The South African War stirred into life women's movements which barely existed before the war. In doing so, the construction of women as purely domestic figures, operating in the private sphere, began slowly to change. British women moved actively into suffrage movements in the postwar era (Walker 1990). It could be argued that Boer women, rather than internalising the '*volksmoeder*' (mother of the people) concept as Brink and others have suggested, actively used it to claim their place as part of the political Afrikaner nation (Brink 1990; du Toit 1996).

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate some of the complexity of the relationship between women and war in South Africa in 1899–1902. Their responses to war varied greatly. Miriam Cooke (1996) has noted that war history is constructed from multiple stories. 'Each story told by someone who experienced a war, or by someone who read about someone who experienced a war, becomes part of a mosaic the many colors and shapes of which make up the totality of that war' (Vietzen 1999: 225). But these experiences are more than a mosaic. Social cleavages emerged more sharply in the context of war, particularly in the closed environments of the concentration camps and the siege towns. At the same time, war was also a catalyst for change, promoting the formation of ethnic identity and stimulating political awareness amongst South African women.

## Biographies

### Sister Bakkes

In Europe the South African War was a touchstone of political morality and the Boer cause attracted a wide variety of volunteers. The foreign commandos have received considerable attention but much less is known of the women who offered their services to the Boers. Amongst these was Sister Bakkes, who was sent by the Dutch government as a volunteer nurse in the camps.<sup>51</sup> She had been in South Africa before the war, as head of the *Volkshospitaal* in Pretoria.<sup>52</sup> She remained in the camps throughout the war, serving in Winburg camp. Although the British authorities were paranoid about Boer sympathisers in the camps, where at least one nurse was dismissed for airing such views,<sup>53</sup> Sister Bakkes received nothing but high praise from the authorities. Her hard work, tact and prudence won her considerable respect from the camp doctor.<sup>54</sup>

I have nothing but praise for her work. In the early days of this camp she was quite alone, and the amount of work she got through was wonderful, besides she has worked in the camp now for nearly two years without leaving it for a single night. She has always shown great tact and fairness, and it has always been a pleasure for me to work with her.<sup>55</sup>

At the end of the war she was granted a free passage home to Holland, and an award from the British for her services.

### Bettie Grobbelaar

Sixteen-year-old Bettie Grobbelaar of the Orange Free State differed from her peers only in her feeling for words, and her decision to record her experiences during the South African War. In the 1930s, at the time of the centenary of the Great Trek and advancing Afrikaner nationalism, she rewrote her diary, translating it into more formal Afrikaans, probably from the Dutch patois, the *kombuis taal* widely spoken by Boers at the turn of the century. However, her language retained the rhythms of the Dutch Bible. She was living on a farm in the Kroonstad district when war broke out and the men in her family joined the commandos. Many of the black farm labourers had also disappeared and the Boer women were forced to engage in the unfamiliar tasks of labouring in the fields and caring for the animals. Bettie found the going very difficult:



One of the Dutch  
volunteer nurses.

*Die stilte op die plaas is swaar, die koring is ryp, ons het net 2 werks kaffers om koring te sny, ons het beetje gehelp maar dit is te swaar werk om met n sekel te sny, die eerste dag was ons fluks, die 2de dag was my rug styf ek moes toe vir die perde sorg, ek was bang om tussen die perde te gaan in die stal, maar 'n mens word aan al jou pligte gewoond die eerste maal toe ek die kar inspan het ek die binne lysel verkeerd vas gemaak. O! hoe eensaam...<sup>56</sup>*

There is a heavy silence on the farm, the corn is ripe, we have only two working kaffirs to cut the corn, we helped a bit but it is too difficult to cut with a sickle, the first day we were energetic but on the second day my back was stiff then I had to look after the horses, I was frightened to go among the horses in the stable, but one must get used to your duties the first time that I inspanned the cart I fastened the inner reins incorrectly. Oh! how lonely...

This hard labour was not usual for Boer women. Mrs Pooe, an inmate of the black camp at Vredefort Road, observed that Boer women, unlike black women, rarely worked in the fields, leaving the hard labour to their menfolk or black labourers.

With us blacks, I would go into the fields with my husband and perhaps with my children if they were already old enough. With the Boers as 'bywoners' it was different. Normally their wives could not go out into the fields to hoe. The husband would have to do the hoeing alone. Or sometimes he would take out money to pay for whomever he would hire. With us we would hoe together with Naphtali [her husband] or organize a work party. (Keegan 1981: 141)

Fearful of British intentions when they reached the republic, Grobbelaar's family took the decision made by many others to flee into the veld. Other women had taken refuge on the Grobbelaar farm and, when the British arrived, 37 women and children escaped in the dark with baskets of *vetkoek* and blankets. Between the middle of May 1901, and the middle of August, during the bitter winter months, they wandered from farm to farm through the veld, often cold and hungry.

*Dit het dae geduur, die kakies is lastig nie, ons rus nie, ons bly in die veld, en kuier by die huis. Ons maal elke dag koring vir meel, die meule vlug saam. ... Die meel bly maar bietje grof, maar dit maak lekker beskuitjes, ons werk hard ons moet altyd gereed wees om te vlug, dit is so bitter koud...<sup>57</sup>*

It lasted for days, The khakis [British soldiers] are troublesome, we don't rest, we stay in the veld, and eat at the house. We mill corn every day for flour, the mills travel with us...The flour is a bit coarse, but it makes nice biscuits, we work hard we must always be ready to flee, it is so very cold.

Eventually even the waterless sandveld, '*waar dit nog altyd veilig was vir ons*' (where it was always safe for us), was no longer a safe haven, and they were betrayed, Grobbelaar claimed, by '*handoppers*' (literally 'hands-uppers', i.e those who surrendered).<sup>58</sup> They were rounded up and taken into the notorious Brandfort camp. Here the families were subjected to endless regulations, apparently harsh and pointless.

*Ons houd moet ons buite kamp ontvang net takke, ons mag dit nie deur die kamp sleep nie, en mag ook nie in die kamp kap nie, en die kamp is groot ons moet die ver dra, so moet ons eers buite die kamp dit self kap, dan dit dra, dis nou vir 'n wek se randsoen.<sup>59</sup>*

We had to collect our wood outside the camp, just sticks, we couldn't haul it through the camp, nor could we chop it in the camp and the camp is so big we had to carry it so far, so we first had to chop it outside the camp ourselves, then carry it, this was for a week's rations.

Disease and death was all around them. Bettie Grobbelaar's sister and her five children all died, the last buried in her arms. Like a number of other young women, Grobbelaar became a volunteer nurse, a probationer, in the hospital. Here she was particularly troubled by the lack of sustenance for the children (patients suffering from typhoid fever were put on a light diet of milk), and she did her best to subvert this treatment.

*Die kinders is uitgeteer al medesyne wat hulle kry, is Cotliver oil, donker bruin van kleur en so dik soos watter goed, en sleg, die paciente kry nie kos voor die koors 'n paar dae normal kry nie, die kinders is honger, ek gee hulle alger sop, die suster loop die hospital deur so moet ek op my hoede wees. Die kondens melk met water aangemaak dis al wat hulle mag krij, ek more 'n tee lepel beef tee, hulle drink die koppie sop vinnig uit hulle weet wat is wat.<sup>60</sup>*

The children are emaciated all the medicine they get is codliver oil, dark brown in colour and as thick as I don't know what, and bad, the patients don't get food until the temperature has been normal for a couple of days, the children are hungry, I give all of them soup, the sister walks through the hospital so I have to be alert. Condensed milk mixed with water is all they are allowed, I [give] them a teaspoon of beef tea, they drink the cup of soup quickly they know what is what.

The image of passive female suffering, which has become integral to the mythology of the camps, has led historians to ignore the totality of the camp experience. The many studies of resistance to oppression, of slaves and of blacks in South Africa, to name only two, should alert us to the narrowness of this focus. Grobbelaar recorded a number of instances of resistance. The most dramatic occurred when the women in Brandfort camp confronted the unpopular camp commandant, EJ Jacobs, about the quality of the food:

*Op die 25ste November 1901 vroeg in die more Baie vroeg in the more gaan eenige lydende moeders rond in die kamp om ons aan te sê, dat ons 9 uur by die Komandant se kantoor was: om 9 uur was hondered vroue en dogters by die kantoor. Elk een met die randsoen vleis. van die more. Ek ook in die getal. Ons stel Mevrou van Tonder aan om te praat, met die Komedant, hy was n onbeleefde Kolonie boer. he word virsoek om uittekom. Hy weier so 'n bang broek. hy stuur die hoof dokter om met ons te praat...<sup>61</sup>*

On the 25th November early in the morning Very early in the morning one of the suffering mothers went round the camp to say to us, that we must go to the Commandant's office at 9 o'clock: at 9 o'clock there were a hundred wives and daughters at the office. Every one had that morning's meat rations. I was amongst the number. We sent Mrs van Tonder to talk to him, with the Commandant, he was an ill-mannered Colonial boer [i.e. from the Cape]: he was asked to come out. He was such a coward that he sent the head doctor to talk to us.

Jacobs promised reform and, although the ringleaders were subsequently arrested for a couple of weeks, the authorities had clearly taken fright for Jacobs was replaced by a more efficient man.<sup>62</sup>

Such confrontation seems to have been fairly rare. More common was resistance to the hospitalisation of their children, a practice which the Boer women bitterly resented. 'A Boer woman is used to tend her sick herself, above all her own children,' Tant Alie Badenhorst explained, 'but in camp they were compelled to give them up' (Badenhorst 1923: 304). Bettie Grobbelaar considered that '*Die beste wegsteek plek is in n trommel. as die dokter en suster virby is haal hulle dit uit, en dan weer in die bed*' (The best hiding place is in a trunk, when the doctor and sister have passed the children are taken out and returned to bed).<sup>63</sup>

Another form of resistance was escape, and it was not difficult to do so for the women often visited local towns or foraged for wood and cow dung, for fuel. Spies records 91 women and children who escaped from the camps and most published accounts mention such incidents (Badenhorst 1923; Fischer 1964; Raal 1938, 2000; Spies 1977: 171). The logistics of survival were problematic, however, in a raped countryside swarming with enemy, and the women were a burden for the Boer commandos. Bettie Grobbelaar's family discussed the idea:

*...elke aand is ons tent vol, vroue, hulle maak nou ook reg om weg te loop, [Nonnie] Vermaak haar mense is buite ons gaan bij hulle bly, dit moet net donker wees, dan moet ons stil tussen die blokhuisdeur en dit is gevaelik...*

...every evening our tent is full of women, they discuss escape, Aunt Vermaak's people are out we can stay with them, it just has to be dark, then we must slip quietly through the blockhouses and that is dangerous...

They were dissuaded by Tant Mieta Rheeder:

*sy sê nie, dis te gevaelik die kakies sal ons skiet en die tweede, ons is vreemd, ons mense is in Kroonstad Dst. nie ou sus bly julle waar julle is, wees tevreden, en moet nie julle kinders laat dood skiet nie.*<sup>64</sup>

she says no, it is too dangerous the khakis will shoot us and secondly, we are strangers, our people are in Kroonstad district no old sister stay where you are, be content, and don't let your children be shot dead.

Grobbelaar's account is, above all, a lament – for her lost youth, for the dead children, for the '*lydende*' (suffering) mothers. Like the women who survived the Holocaust, or the Dutch women in the Japanese camps of the Second World War, recording her experiences was a means of coming to terms with the trauma of her young life (van Heyningen 2005).

### **Emelia Mahlodi Pooe (Nkgono Mma-Pooe)**

Mrs Pooe,<sup>65</sup> a Sotho-speaking woman, was almost 100 years old when her story was recorded by a descendant. Her parents, the Molefes, of Ngwato-Kwena origin, had been unable to survive in Lesotho and had moved into the Orange Free State to become labour-tenants in the Heilbron district when she was born. By the time the South African War started, her family had become sharecroppers on the Zaaiplaas, just southwest of Heilbron. This region, later part of the 'maize triangle', was thoroughly cleared and devastated by the British in the 'scorched earth' clearings. The Molefe family did not escape. The men were conscripted into the British army and the women interned in the black camp at Vredefort Road. Their cattle, already devastated by the *rinderpest* (an infectious disease), were lost to them. To Mrs Pooe the struggle for survival in this crowded environment was a foretaste of urban location life. Like the white camp inmates, rations were limited, firewood was in short supply and the ordinary institutions of daily social life were interrupted. The food was poor, the porridge made from the type of maize she knew as animal feed.

In September 1901 there were 1 579 inmates at the Vredefort Road black camp, 163 men, 496 women and 920 children. Numbers stabilised at about 1 500 in the months that followed. According to the official records mortality was low, averaging between three and four a month. The object of the black camps was to provide for the black inmates as cheaply as possible, by making the people work the fields. Mrs Pooe's memory appears to have been somewhat vague by the time she was interviewed but she recalled the hard work of tilling the fields. 'Although they were accustomed to eating green mealies, they were not allowed to do so in camp, as it was said that by so doing the projected harvest targets would not be achieved' (Keegan 1981: 348). Vredefort Road camp was slow to become completely independent, however. As late as March 1902, 742 inmates were still being rationed on reduced payment (they paid a reduced sum for bags of mealies) and 795 were maintained free. The cost of the camp for that month was £732, one of the most expensive camps in the ORC, of which about £32 was recovered from the men working for the British and £70 obtained through sales of 'medical comforts'.<sup>66</sup>

The postwar era was hard. Blacks had lost as much or more than Boers in the war although, thanks to Lotbinerie's intervention, some received compensation. Before the war the Molefe family had owned a span of oxen, enabling them to sharecrop on a relatively equal basis. After the war, although they returned to Zaaiplaas, without oxen their position was far less favourable. Nevertheless, the family was more fortunate than some who had lost most members of their families and were left with no place to go except on the most difficult terms.

## NOTES

- 1 The only academic study of the camps, one of the primary historical texts of apartheid-era Afrikaner nationalism, *Die Konsentrasiekampe* (Otto 1954) has been republished, misleadingly passed off by the publisher as a new work (Otto 2005).
- 2 For a brief overview of the political context of camp historiography see van Heyningen (2005). There are a handful of theses on individual camps, the most outstanding being Hattingh (1967) and Wohlberg (2000). Noteworthy also is Wasserman (1999a, 1999b, 2005).
- 3 The records of the Native Refugee Department consist only of a few financial papers, although the evidence suggests that they were originally quite extensive.
- 4 I should like to thank the Wellcome Trust for funding which has made the research on the concentration camps possible. They are not responsible for my opinions. I should also like to thank Dr Iain Smith for his support and for our discussions, some of which have been summarised in the arguments below. The term 'concentration camp' is extremely problematic. At first the British referred to the Boer inmates as 'refugees', a term which was much resented as the women regarded themselves as involuntary residents. The Transvaal authorities used the term 'burgher camps'. For the British the term 'refugee' was confusing since it was also used for Uitlander refugees, whose plight occupied much of their attention and was a counter point to the position of the Boer 'refugees'. Increasingly the British authorities used the term 'concentration camp'; thus the 'Ladies Commission' was formally called a 'concentration camps' commission. Since the Second World War the term has acquired much grimmer connotations, and has been manipulated by Afrikaner nationalist writers to exaggerate the punitive nature of the British camps in South Africa.
- 5 It should be noted that, although these camps were often referred to as 'women's camps', this was something of a paradox. There were substantial numbers of men present as well, but because they were usually regarded as hensoppers, traitors to the Boer cause, their presence has been largely ignored, providing little fuel for Afrikaner nationalist rhetoric.
- 6 In some cases this is obvious. In Nylstroom camp, where blacks appear to have been entered in the same register as whites, the relevant pages have been cut out and a note attached, dating the action. Fortunately the cover, which was not removed, has the first page of the list. See National Archives Repository (NAR), DBC 63.
- 7 A few other camps of brief duration also existed, usually as transit camps. Others were mooted but were never established, Mooi River in Natal and Ladybrand in the ORC being two examples.
- 8 See for example the report of Dr TW Hime, Free State Archives Repository (FSAR), SRC 31 RC 10324, p. 9.
- 9 Children were defined variously as under 12 years in the Transvaal and under 15 in the ORC. This could make a great difference to the amount of food available to families.
- 10 FSAR, SRC 2 RC 280, 16.02.1901, Chief Superintendent Refugee Camps (CSRC) to District Commissioner, Harrismith.
- 11 No rising agents were provided; there were no eggs, no milk and no fat. It is hard to imagine what could be done with the flour under these circumstances. At no point were public ovens introduced, which might have helped with the chronic fuel shortages.
- 12 By 1900 scientific understanding of nutrition had advanced to the point where the relationship between protein, carbohydrates and calories was fairly well established. Several researchers at the time pointed out that the camp ration scales were inadequate on this count alone. Vitamins had not been discovered and the origins of scurvy were not understood but it was realised that fresh fruit and vegetables were desirable. Ration scales are published in a variety of sources. See, for instance, Hobhouse (1902) and Spies (1977). On analyses of the ration scales see United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA), CO 879/75/687, file 45124 no. 79, 02.12.1901, Memorandum by Dr JS Haldane on the rations in the concentration camps; CO 879/75/687, file 882 no. 129, 06.01.1902, Dr Sidney Martin to the Colonial Office.
- 13 The complaints of the camp inmates seem to have been entirely justified on this point as the huge correspondence in the official records testifies. Some of the other claims, such as blue vitriol and ground glass in the sugar, hooks in the tinned meat and the like, were mythical. By the end of 1901 food and water were regularly analysed. Some was certainly rejected as unfit for consumption but constant efforts were made to ensure that quality was acceptable. See Wessels (2002) on the origin of the blue vitriol story and FSAR, SRC 15 RC 5979, 01.11.1901, HF Wilson to the CSRC and related correspondence, on analyses of water.
- 14 For black ration scales in the ORC see FSAR, SRC 2 RC 487a, Scale of rations for white and black refugees; SRC 2 RC 291, 15.02.1901, Scale of rations for native refugee camps. On pellagra see Roe and Beck (2000). In all the camps such alternatives as rice were specified but rarely provided.
- 15 FSAR, SRC 3 RC 591, 12.03.1901, CSRC to the Superintendent, Kroonstad.
- 16 Thomson had been Sanitary Commissioner of the North-West Provinces in India. UKNA, CO 879/73/682, file 1826 no. 50, 14.01.1902, A Milner to J Chamberlain.
- 17 FSAR, SRC 34, A 291, 05.11.1901, Correspondence on Mrs Bullen.
- 18 UKNA, CO 224/5/38048, CO 224/6/36983 and CO 224/6/42355, Nurses for the concentration camps.
- 19 Alcohol was used as a stimulant, particularly for cases of typhoid fever. The reason for its widespread use was probably the lack of other therapies. The practice was by no means confined to the camps. Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, for

- instance, used considerable quantities of alcohol (Lomax 1996). Eventually the camp authorities tightened up on the quantities used, partly because they considered it bad medical practice, and partly because it clearly contributed to alcoholism in the camps. FSAR, SRC 18 RC 7182, 10.01.1902, Report of Dr AJ Tonkin.
- 20 FSAR, SRC 6 RC 1708, 30.04.1901, Monthly report on Brandfort camp.
  - 21 FSAR, SRC 8 RC 2424, 01.06.1901, Monthly report for Brandfort camp.
  - 22 FSAR, SRC 13 RC 4925, 09.09.1901, Dr Tregaskis to Superintendent, Heilbron camp.
  - 23 FSAR, SRC 14 RC 5260, 16.09.1901, CSRC to Superintendent, Aliwal North camp and related correspondence.
  - 24 FSAR, SRC 2 RC 403, 05.03.1901, Dr Pern to Superintendent, Bloemfontein camp.
  - 25 FSAR, SRC 22 RC 8215, 21.03.1902, Dr Pratt Yule to CSRC.
  - 26 UKNA, CO 879/70/663, file 33845 no. 110, p. 21, 11.10.1900, Lady Hobhouse to Lord Lansdowne and related correspondence, pp. 128, 129, 211, 281.
  - 27 FSAR, A 156/3/11, Steyn collection. Stanley (2005) also contrasts the depersonalised language of the military, concerned with 'sweeps' and 'drives', with Hobhouse's concern about what this meant in humanitarian terms. See also, for instance, Dr T Whiteside Hime's diatribe against the pro-Boers in his report on the ORC camps. FSAR, SRC 31 RC 10324, Report on the Boer refugee camps, Orange River Colony, 10.01.1902, pp. 10–16.
  - 28 The commission consisted of Millicent Garrett Fawcett; Katherine B Brereton, who had been in charge of the Yeomanry Hospital in South Africa; Lucy AE Deane, an official government inspector of factories; Lady Knox, wife of General Sir William Knox, who had some knowledge of the Free State camps; Dr Ella Campbell Scarlett and Dr Jane Elizabeth Waterston.
  - 29 FSAR, SRC 22 RC 8215, 21.03.1902, G van der Wall to the CSRC and related correspondence.
  - 30 FSAR, SRC 69, p. 54.
  - 31 FSAR, SRC 1 RC 182, 21.02.1901, Officer Commanding, Native Refugee Camp Edenburg to the CSRC; SRC 2 RC 478, 04.03.1901, OC NRC Edenburg to the CSRC; SRC 4 RC 1064, 03.04.1901, Superintendent NRC Edenburg to CSRC.
  - 32 FSAR, SRC 5 RC 1206, 12.04.1901, Report on Edenburg and Springfontein refugee camps; FSAR, SRC 91, Death register for black camps.
  - 33 The question of health and mortality in the camps is the subject of ongoing research and is still very problematic. There is no reason why black camp residents should have suffered less from the measles epidemic which decimated Boer children, and their inferior accommodation and nutrition suggests that, until 1902, mortality was likely to be higher than in the white camps (Spies 1977; Warwick 1983).
  - 34 FSAR, CO 52/15/1902, 31.12.1901, Compensation claims of native losses.
  - 35 FSAR, CO 48/4353/1901, 25.11.1901, Report on visit to Native Refugee Camps.
  - 36 FSAR, CO 46/4282/1901, 23.11.1901, Correspondence on the insufficiency of food at Honingspruit NRC.
  - 37 FSAR, CO 62/935/1902, 02.04.1902, Necessity for the appointment of a marriage officer for the Native Refugee Camps.
  - 38 FSAR, CO 150/1727/1903, Petition of Samuel James Mabote, Kroonstad, for exemption under the Coloured Persons Relief Ordinance, 1903; CO 150/1728/1903, Petition of John Rees Phakane, Vredefort, ORC for exemption under the Coloured Persons Relief Ordinance, 1903.
  - 39 NAR, A 951, HW Huyser collection, Grobler manuscript.
  - 40 McGregor Museum, Kimberley, KM 87/8523, Letter of 'Bess', pp. 3, 11.
  - 41 Mrs Graham was subsequently injured in the lung by a shell and died in the hospital after the shell led her to 'break a blood vessel'. She was widely known in the town (to Miss Craufurd she was 'Dear Mrs Graham') and her death was much commented upon (Bottomley 1997; Craufurd 1900–01: 109; Gwynne 1996; Plaatje 1999).
  - 42 Brenthurst Library MS.147/5/3/36, Vyvyan Papers, Miss Friend to CB Vyvyan, 28.12.1899.
  - 43 CA, A 333, 'Women and the War', *Cape Times*, c01.03.1900; see also A 333, 'Loyal Women', *Cape Argus*[?], cDec. 1900; leader on Guild of Loyal Women, *Cape Times*[?], 18 January 1905. These news clippings are usually undated except by year and the sources are rarely given although the majority appear to come from the *Cape Times*.
  - 44 CA, A 333, Meeting at The Hill, *Cape Times*[?], 24.03.1900.
  - 45 CA, A 333, 'Guild of Loyal Women', *Cape Times*, 22.04.1900.
  - 46 CA, A 333, Letter, Z Stamper, Honorary Federal Secretary, *Cape Times*[?], c14.07.1906.
  - 47 CA, A 333, 'Loyal Women's Guild', *Cape Argus*, 07.06.1900; *Cape Times*, 12, 15, 18.06.1900. CA, A 333, 'Loyal Women's Guild', *Cape Times*, 13.07.1900.
  - 48 NAR, A 1842, Diary of Isabella Lipp, pp. 26–7, 48, 68–9. The original of this diary is in Stellenbosch University Library.
  - 49 Emily Hobhouse's letters from Cape Town give a good idea of this circle (van Reenen 1983).
  - 50 Schreiner was not invited to the opening of the Women's Monument in Bloemfontein, despite her wartime pro-Boer stance (Schoeman 1992).
  - 51 FSAR, SRC 7 RC 1938, Report on Brandfort camp.

- 52 UKNA, CO 879/7/665, File 8780 no. 44, 09.03.1901, J Chamberlain to A Milner.
- 53 FSAR, SRC 10 RC 3903, 03.08.1901, St J Cole Bowen to CSRC.
- 54 FSAR, SRC 13 RC 4901, 13.09.1901, Dr TH Molesworth to CSRC.
- 55 NAR, A 2310, 29.12.1902, Dr TH Molesworth to the Superintendent, Winburg camp.
- 56 FSAR, A 248, pp. 2–3.
- 57 FSAR, A 248, pp. 22–3.
- 58 FSAR, A 248, p. 24.
- 59 FSAR, A 248, p. 41.
- 60 FSAR, A 248, pp. 30–1.
- 61 FSAR, A 248, pp. 52–3.
- 62 This event was recorded by other women as well. See especially the testimony of Maria Els in Hobhouse (1924). Mortality at the Brandfort camp was at its height when it was visited by the Ladies' Commission on 29 October 1901. Even their hostile report agrees that there was disorganisation and corruption. They recommended the dismissal of the camp doctor for stealing medical comforts (Cd 893).
- 63 FSAR, A 248, p. 42.
- 64 FSAR, A 248, p. 37.
- 65 The material on the life of Mrs Pooe seems to be one of the few transcripts from the University of the Witwatersrand Oral History Project which has been analysed and published. This account is taken from Beinart et al. (1986: 343–5) and Matsetela (1982: 212–21).
- 66 FSAR, CO 45/4183/02.

## REFERENCES

- Akenson DH (1992) *God's peoples: Covenant and land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Alberts P (2005) *Die smarte van oorlog*. Brandfort: Kraal.
- Algie JR (nd) *The Mafeking siege diary of John Ronald Algie*. Mafikeng: Mafikeng Museum.
- Atteridge MP (c1930) *A short history of the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa*. Pretoria: The Guild.
- Badenhorst A (1923) *Tant Alie of the Transvaal: Her diary 1880–1902*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Beinart W, Delius P & Trapido S (Eds) (1986) *Putting a plough to the ground: Accumulation and dispossession in rural South Africa, 1850–1930*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Bell CGH (nd) Mafeking siege diary. Grahamstown: Cory Library MS 7348.
- Bottomley J (ed) (1997) The siege of Mafeking and the imperial mindset as revealed in the diaries of T.W.P. (Tom) Hayes & W.P. (William) Hayes, district surgeons. *New Contree*, 41: 25–161.
- Bradford H (2002) Gentlemen and Boers: Afrikaner nationalism, gender, and colonial warfare in the South African War. In G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh & M-L Suttie (Eds) *Writing a wider war. Rethinking gender, race, and identity in the South African War, 1899–1902*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Brayborn G & Summerfield P (1987) *Out of the cage: Women's experiences in two world wars*. London: Pandora.
- Brink E (1990) Man-made women: Gender, class and the ideology of the volksmoeder. In C Walker (ed) *Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Burton A (1994) *Burdens of history: British feminists, Indian women and imperial culture, 1865–1915*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cammack D (1990) *The Rand at war 1899–1902: The Witwatersrand and the Anglo-Boer War*. London: James Currey.
- Cd 819 (1901) *Reports etc on the working of the refugee camps in the Transvaal, Orange River Colony, Cape Colony and Natal*.
- Cd 893 (1902) *Report on the concentration camps in South Africa by the Committee of Ladies appointed by the Secretary of State for War containing reports on the camps in Natal, the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal*.
- Changuion L, Jacobs F & Alberts P (2005) *Suffering of war*. Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics.
- Cock A (1974) *Petticoat in Mafeking: The letters of Ada Cock, with annotations and a vindication of Baden-Powell*. Kommetjie: JF Midgeley.
- Cock J (1991) *Colonels and cadres: War and gender in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Coetzer O (2000) *Fire in the sky: The destruction of the Orange Free State 1899–1902*. Weltevreden Park: Covos-Day.
- Cooke M (1996) *Women and the war story*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Cooke M & Woollacott A (Eds) (1993) *Gendering war talk*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

- Cowan I (1995) *Mafeking besieged: The diary of civilian nurse Miss Ina Cowan, 12th Oct. 1899 – 17th May 1900, including a complete roll of all the nurses who served and a day-by-day casualty list*. No publisher.
- Craufurd AM (1900–01) A nurse's diary in besieged Mafeking. *Crampton's Magazine*.
- Davey AM (ed) (1983) *The defence of Ladysmith and Mafeking: Accounts of two sieges, 1899–1900, being the South African War experiences of William Thwaites, Steuart Birney, Alfred Down and Samuel Cawood*. Johannesburg: The Brenthurst Press.
- Deacon H (1997) Cape Town and 'country' doctors in the Cape Colony during the first half of the twentieth century. *Social History of Medicine*, 10(1): 25–52.
- Du Toit A (1992) 'Die bewustheid van armoed': The ACVV and the construction of Afrikaner identity. *Social Dynamics*, 18(2): 1–25.
- Du Toit A (1996) Women, welfare and the nurturing of Afrikaner nationalism: A social history of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging, c1870–1929. PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.
- First R & Scott A (1980) *Olive Schreiner: A biography*. London: The Women's Press.
- Fischer MA (1964) *Tant Miem se kampdagboek Mei 1901–Augustus 1902*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Genge M (2002) The role of the EmaSwati in the South African War. In G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh & M-L Suttie (Eds) *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race, and identity in the South African War, 1899–1902*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Grundlingh A (2002) The National Women's Monument: The making and mutation of meaning in Afrikaner memory of the South African War. In G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh & M-L Suttie (Eds) *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race, and identity in the South Afrcan War, 1899–1902*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Gwynne SD (1996) 'Lord of hosts on our side': *Mafeking siege diary of Sarah Dixon Gwynne*. Pietermaritzburg: G Christison.
- Hattingh JL (1967) Die Irenekonsentrasiekamp. *The Archives Yearbook for South African History*, 1. Pretoria.
- Hobhouse EH (1902) *The brunt of the war and where it fell*. London: Methuen.
- Hobhouse EH (1924) *War without glamour: Or women's war experiences written by themselves, 1899–1902*. Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers.
- Keegan T (1981) The transformation of agrarian society and economy in industrialising South Africa: The Orange Free State grain belt in the early twentieth century. PhD thesis, University of London.
- Kessler S (1996) *Swart konsentrasiekampe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog*. Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics.
- Kessler S (1999) The black and coloured concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902: Shifting paradigm from sole martyrdom to mutual suffering. *Historia*, 44(1): 110–147.
- Kessler S (2001) The black and coloured concentration camps. In F Pretorius (ed) *Scorched earth*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Kessler S (2003) The black concentration camps of the South African War, 1899–1902. PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.
- Krebs P (1999) *Gender, race and the writing of empire: Public discourse and the Boer War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lomax ER (1996) *Small and special: The development of hospitals for children in Victorian Britain*. London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.
- Marks S (1994) *Divided sisterhood: Race, class and gender in the South African nursing profession*. London: St Martin's Press.
- Marwick A (1977) *Women at war, 1914–1918*. London: Croom Helm.
- Matsetela T (1982) The life story of Nkgono Mma-Pooe: Aspects of sharecropping and proletarianisation in the northern Orange Free State, 1890–1930. In S Marks & R Rathbone (Eds) *Industrialisation and social change in South Africa: African class formation, culture, and consciousness, 1870–1930*. London: Longman.
- Mbenga B (2002) The role of the Bakgatla of the Pilanesberg in the South African War. In G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh & M-L Suttie (Eds) *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race, and identity in the South African War, 1899–1902*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Meyer C (1999) *Days of horror during the siege of Kimberley 1899/1900*. Kimberley: Kimberley Africana Library.
- Milner V (1951) *My picture gallery 1886–1901*. London: John Murray.
- Mohlamme JS (2001) African refugee camps in the Boer republics. In F Pretorius (ed) *Scorched earth*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Nasson B (1991) *Abraham Esau's war: A black South African War in the Cape, 1899–1902*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Neilly JE (1900) *Besieged with B.-P: A complete record of the siege and relief of Mafeking*. London: CA Pearson.
- Opperman DJ (1950) *Groot verseboek* (2nd edition). Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel.
- Otto JC (1954) *Die konsentrasiekampe*. Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel.
- Otto JC (2005) *Die konsentrasiekampe*. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis.
- Plaatje ST (1999) *The Mafeking diary of Sol T. Plaatje*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Raal S (1938) *Met die Boere in the veld: Die ervarings van die skryfster* (3rd edition). Cape Town: Nasionale Pers.
- Raal S (2000) *The lady who fought: A young woman's account of the Anglo-Boer War*. Plumstead: Stormberg.
- Raath AWG (2003) *Die Boerevrou, 1899–1902* (vol. 2): *Kampsmarte*. Bloemfontein: Volkskomitee vir die Herdenking van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog.

- Rice M (2004) *From Dolly Gray to Sarie Marais: The Boer War in popular memory*. Noordhoek: Fischer Press.
- Roe D & Beck SV (2000) Pellagra. In KF Kiple & KC Ornelas (Eds) *The Cambridge world history of food* (vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ross E (1980) *Diary of the siege of Mafeking October 1899 to May 1900*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society.
- Saunders F (1996) *Mafeking memories*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Schoeman K (1992) *Only anguish to live here: Olive Schreiner and the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Spies SB (1977) *Methods of barbarism? Roberts, Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics: January 1900 – May 1902*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Stanley L (2005) 'A strange thing is memory': Emily Hobhouse, memory work, moral life and the 'concentration system'. *South African Historical Journal*, 25: 60–81.
- Stanley L (2006) *Mourning becomes . . . Post/memory and the concentration camps of the South African War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Strachey R (1931) *Millicent Garrett Fawcett*. London: John Murray.
- Van Heyningen E (1984) Refugees and relief in Cape Town, 1899–1902. *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, 1: 64–113.
- Van Heyningen E (1989) Agents of empire: The medical profession in the Cape Colony, 1880–1910. *Medical History*, 33: 450–471.
- Van Heyningen E (1999) The voices of women in the South African War. *South African Historical Journal*, 41: 22–43.
- Van Heyningen E (2001) Women under siege. In IR Smith (ed) *The siege of Mafeking* (vol. 2). Johannesburg: The Brenthurst Press.
- Van Heyningen E (2002) Women and disease: The clash of medical cultures in the concentration camps of the South African War. In G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh & M-L Suttie (Eds) *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race, and identity in the South African War, 1899–1902*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Van Heyningen E (2005) New perspectives on the concentration camps of the South African War. Paper presented at the South African Historical Association Conference, Cape Town.
- Van Heyningen E & Merrett P (2002) 'The healing touch': The guild of loyal women of South Africa 1900–1912. *South African Historical Journal*, 47: 24–50.
- Van Reenen R (ed) (1983) *Emily Hobhouse: Boer War letters*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Vietzen S (1999) The letters speak: Mary Moore, war and the battle of Colenso, December 1900. *South African Historical Journal*, 41: 222–245.
- Walker C (1990) The women's suffrage movement: The politics of gender, race and class. In C Walker (ed) *Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Warwick P (1983) *Black people and the South African War 1899–1902*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wasserman JM (1999a) *The Eshowe concentration camp and surrendered burghers camp during the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902*. Durban: Waterman.
- Wasserman JM (1999b) *The Pinetown concentration camp during the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902*. Durban: Waterman.
- Wasserman JM (2005) The Natal Afrikaner and the Anglo-Boer War. PhD thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Weir CJ (1901) *The Boer War: A diary of the siege of Mafeking*. Edinburgh: Spence & Phimister.
- Wessels E (2002) A cage without bars. In F Pretorius (ed) *Scorched earth*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Wohlberg A (2000) The Merebank concentration camp in Durban, 1901–1902. MA thesis, University of the Orange Free State.

## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

- National Archives Repository, South Africa.
- Free State Archives Repository, South Africa.
- United Kingdom National Archives.
- McGregor Museum, Kimberley, South Africa.
- Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Stellenbosch University Library, South Africa.

# 'Let them build more gaols'

NOMBONISO GASA

Black<sup>1</sup> South African women's resistance to carrying pass documents is a paradox. On the one hand, the women's actions stand out as strikingly brave, bold political initiatives. Historically, there were times when the seething fury of angry black women exploded into forms of resistance which far exceeded their male counterparts in militancy. Within contemporary political circles, black women are commonly credited with possessing superior political instincts which, once set in motion, become a formidable, if not unstoppable force...On the other hand, under closer scrutiny, a powerful conservative element emerges as the driving force of these movements... (Wells 1993: 1)

The broad contours and cartographies of women's resistance to racial oppression, politico-legal infantilisation, economic exploitation, social marginalisation and the pass laws in particular appear to be well documented. A plethora of literature has been produced in the last two decades, some of which is seminal work. Amongst these are Walker (1986, 1991) and Wells (1993), as well as a host of chapters in books, academic journals and theses. There are also some biographical works such as those by Joseph (1986), Baard (1986) and Resha (1991), which deepen our appreciation of the early women's struggle.

This chapter is not intended to be a new or comprehensive account of the early women's resistance but aims to provide a re-reading and reinterpretation. It also attempts to recast the meanings of the early struggles in a manner that gives greater weight to women's political agency. Nothing that is said here pretends to be the last word. Some of this history remains suffused with ambiguity and defies a single, authoritative interpretation. What is intended is to open up the debate around how black, and especially African, women's involvement in protest activities of the early twentieth century has been characterised.

Drawing on some of the texts and arguments that have emerged in the unfolding debate over women in South African history and feminist historiography, this chapter explores the multiple ways in which women entered the political scene. Of specific focus here are the early struggles, that is, women's resistance to the pass laws, the organisations that grew out of their protests, and their connections with wider political struggles.

## Contending political interpretations

Looking at the political struggles of this time, it is important to foreground two contending tensions. First, the chapter delves into a complex political landscape to examine the discourse of the dominant national liberation movement, whose messages and images are best captured by Mama's observation that 'the construction of women in nationalist ideologies has been contradictory. On the one hand, nationalists have called for their own "new woman" while on the other hand they have constructed women as upholders of tradition and customs, as reservoirs of culture' (Mama 1997: 54). African nationalist leaders were no exception in terms of the roles they assigned to women in the early days of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, later to become the African National Congress [ANC]).

In a statement quite resonant with the struggles of women on the African continent, Toni Cade Bambara commented on the treatment meted out to women in the civil rights movement in its early days in the United States:

It would seem that every organisation you can name has had to struggle at one time or another with seemingly mutinous cadres of women getting salty about having to man the telephones or fix the coffee while the men wrote position papers and decided on policy. (Bambara 1960: 5)

While there are similarities in women's experiences of patriarchal patterns, it is also important to note the differences, nuances and specificities.

Consequently, the second political question is the complex and uncomfortable exercise of grappling with the dominant and established South African feminist theoretical ethos. While often ground-breaking in their approaches to women's location and position in society, these works have limitations and blind spots, and even display dogmas. At times the dominant feminist historiography and ethos looks at South Africa through problematic lenses informed by the Euro-American and Occidental feminist paradigms. Although there is nothing wrong with these paradigms, it is important to understand that they are not homogeneous in themselves, and also that problematic readings emerge when what happens in the local is viewed only through these knowledge tropes, as if they are the only relevant way of measuring and reading feminist and women's struggles in South Africa and elsewhere.

There is an urgent and clear political reason for African feminist scholarship to revisit, reinterpret and rename historical processes; to insist on a more complex, nuanced reading; and to challenge the persistent framing of questions and answers through dichotomies.

Ginwala (1990) does some of this in her article 'Women and the African National Congress: 1912–1943', where she challenges some of the assertions by Walker that women's non-membership '...laid the basis of the ANC's treatment of women for the

next twenty five years, as a separate category of members outside of the scope of its regular activities' (cited in Walker 1991: xii). Walker was not alone in making this kind of assertion. In fact, these kinds of arguments are commonplace in South African feminist historiography. Julia Wells, for example, comes from a different angle to that of Walker, but it is interesting to note that she brings interpretations that are equally disempowering to black women.

The citation from Wells at the beginning of this chapter draws us to the almost automatic dualist and dichotomous approach that is the Achilles' heel of the dominant feminist paradigm in South Africa – the inability to decode messages and images that can be damaging to black and especially African women. Where are black women, their multiple voices and multiple forms of self-representation, which are often far from the 'heroic' subject and more along the lines of fighting for survival and struggling for dignity and self-expression?

In these dualisms there is a real danger of 'othering' and erasing black women's most significant experiences and political agency. The voice that speaks of the mythical and romanticised powers black women supposedly possess is not their voice; they are not part of that discourse. The 'contemporary political circles' referred to by Wells is a male space, defined by the male and patriarchal authority, as in 'our women's place is in the struggle' (a slogan of the ANC-led national liberation movement).

Adrienne Rich also points to some of the dangers entailed in the conscious choices made about what is represented in the discourse on women's lives, as well as how it is represented:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under inadequate or lying language – this will become not merely unspoken, but unspeakable. (Rich 1993: 236)

While recent feminist works insist on an alternative representation of the history of women's struggles and voices, one which deepens and adds complexity to our understanding, they have barely scratched the surface.

## Revisiting African women's struggles in South Africa

Looking at the early women's public and mass protest in 1913 as a take-off point, the statement 'the source of our oppression forms not only our radicalism but our pain' (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983: 32) is instructive. Of particular importance is the linkage between oppression (as a systemic and legal process) and radicalism (as a response and exercise of choice and agency) and pain (as a private, personal, individual and collective experience).

Somewhere in the vast space in-between the extremes to which the pendulum swings, there is a rich, textured, layered and complex discourse and experience of women making sense of their lives and finding new agency and ways of *being*. An understanding of these struggles and movements calls for an open approach that takes women and their actions on their own terms and also tries to probe their understandings. It also calls for an almost transgressive (as in reading against the grain and the dominant ethos) examination of the multiple ways in which women have exercised their agency and choices.

These are women who in reality are nobody's 'new woman' and who are also making sense of their lived reality, their connections with women outside of their immediate and familiar environment. While firmly grounded in their own environment, these women take an imaginary and physical leap and assert themselves in the political space.

This chapter's approach to the early political struggles of the twentieth century is informed by this attempt to move into the crevices of South African histories and suspend (where they are not useful) the familiar and safe tools of the dominant feminist scholarship.

Abandoning or modifying these approaches and tools of analysis in search of new ways of understanding and reading that history may place one on shaky ground, and in a vulnerable position in relation to established academic voices. But it also opens the way to taking and understanding women's voices for what they are and possibly finding this quite different from one's expectations. This requires that we listen, listen very hard to what is said and to that which remains unmentioned, unmentionable and has been rendered invisible. At times this is not because of absence, but because of the way in which we read the archives, the historical narratives and the documentation.

Sometimes significance lies not in the absence/presence, silence/speech, but in the actual ways in which we read the historical documents, listen to the meta-narratives and pay attention to the details of history, including those which do not fit snugly into those long used, tried and apparently tested boxes that are our analytical tools. Most importantly, the question is how we read, reconstruct the archives and texts, listen to the narratives and develop the analytical tools and framework we find of greatest analytical power.

Beginning with the march in Bloemfontein, this chapter revisits this earlier period and also looks at how women are written in history. While there is no confirmed evidence linking the 1913 march to the earlier protests against pass systems in the previous century, women's struggles are best understood as an ongoing journey along a continuum textured by historical interruptions, but continuing nonetheless.

• • •

## Bloemfontein

### A brief background

The first anti-pass protest in Bloemfontein was in 1894 when women sent petitions to the local municipality. In 1898, the Association of Women of the Household and the Location Women wrote to President Steyn and objected to the ‘service books’. A number of protests to the municipalities continued. Even the formal protests of the African nationalist leaders to the British government frequently highlighted the issue of the indignities suffered as a result of having to produce the pass documents.

As the nineteenth century closed and the twentieth century opened, Bloemfontein’s social and political economy changed. In addition to its own economic growth, the discovery of minerals in Kimberley and the discovery of gold in the Transvaal necessitated the development of a railway line which connected Bloemfontein and the Transvaal.

During the short-lived British takeover of 1848–54, Bloemfontein became an administrative, legal and commercial centre and this status did not change after the war. The discovery of minerals in the towns which shared borders with Bloemfontein also injected new energy and opportunities. This attracted many and saw the burgeoning of the Boer commercial farming community. Its rich cultural character – for whites – is well captured in Stephen Clingman’s biography on Bram Fischer (Clingman 1998).

The economic growth of Bloemfontein also drew a considerable community of skilled and semi-skilled Africans, Coloureds and Indians as farm labourers, workers and professionals. In the official records of the time, people known as Barolong, Bastard, Basotho, Bushmen, Fingo, Cape, Griqua, Hottentot, Koranna, Mozambique, Mxosa, Ndebele, Swazi and Zulu are said to have settled there (Town Council Register 1911).

In direct protest against these categories, from the outset black nationalists used different forms of self-identification, such as ‘black’, ‘ethnic’, ‘Christians’, ‘working people’ and the ‘sons and daughters of the land’ (see, in general, Sol Plaatje in editions of his newspapers, *Tsala ea Bechuana* and *Tsala ea Batho*; the language of the women who protested in 1913; and also the political discourse of the time). No doubt, these categories and forms of self-representation are important not only because they point to some of the thinking at the time, but also because language is a powerful tool in imposing, choosing or rejecting certain identities and racial and ethnic categories.

In the beginning, unlike in other parts of the country, especially the Cape and Natal, the natives were not subjected to the ‘native law’. The common law applied to all those who lived in Bloemfontein. There was also no distinction between African and Coloured; they lived together. However, as Bloemfontein grew and its black population increased, the city was managed according to strict dictates of separation of black people (Coloured people are included in this use of the term ‘black’) from white people.

Waaihoek, the black location just outside the town, emerged partly to address the accommodation needs of the new population, but also to move black squatters away from the railway line.

A set of formal regulations were enacted in 1891 restricting black settlement to Waaihoek, with the exception of those who lived on their employers' premises. Black families were allowed to buy stands in the location, build their homes and pay rentals to the municipality for the land and water (Wells 1993).

The creation of Waaihoek formalised the existence of a black community in Bloemfontein, even if they were tucked away from the mainstream white population. Their relationship to the town, in any case, was that of providing service, and skilled and unskilled labour to the rapidly growing economy.

In addition to the unskilled and skilled labourers and tradesmen like carpenters, cobblers, journalists and other educated black men, Bloemfontein was also an economic gateway for black women. Amongst the women who settled in Bloemfontein were professionals, wives of the middle-class men, including church ministers and ordinary working women who were employed as domestic workers. Unlike in the Rand, the Afrikaner women in Bloemfontein preferred women as domestic workers, judging from patterns of employment in the surrounding countryside. About 50 per cent of black women were in domestic service (Wells 1993: 26).

Consequently, given the employment opportunities and the economic growth, African and Coloured families were drawn to the Orange Free State. Some of the people of Griqua origins came from the eighteenth century migration from the Cape Colony, while some of the Africans came from heterogeneous backgrounds, including those from Thaba Nchu, Chief Moroka's community, Lesotho, and the Tswanas who, like the Griqua, had long historical ties to the area.

There were families from the Cape, especially those of the educated social strata, who saw Bloemfontein as offering great possibilities for their skills. As the demand for work increased, so did the need for settlement and for controlling the movement of black people. From the 1891 regulations, various laws and measures were introduced to do this. Steadily, depending on the political and economic temperature, different forms of mobility control were introduced in the Orange Free State as well as in other parts of the country. In the Cape, the Caledon Code was introduced as far back as 1809 to control the movement of the Khoi. In 1828, it was widened to cover the recently emancipated slaves.

In Bloemfontein the passes had undergone evolution to the extent that by the early 1900s every African person, including school-going children above the age of 16, had to carry a 'service book' that indicated their employer and place of abode. This had to be renewed on a monthly basis, at a fee, for the privilege of living in the city (even if it was in the location, Waaihoek).

The women who did not have stands to rent out and who were not in full-time employment as domestic workers, undertook laundry services as a means of earning money. The sight of black women carrying white people's laundry on their heads,

moving from the white part of Bloemfontein to the location, was common (Wells 1993). However, outbreaks of diphtheria, typhoid and scarlet fever were traced by health authorities to laundry done in muddy and unhygienic conditions in the location. In 1906 the municipality built new public laundry houses, fitted with state-of-the-art steam rooms, sinks and ironing facilities. New regulations prohibited women from taking white people's laundry to the location. It had to be done in the new public washhouse. This shifted women's economic activity dramatically, as they now had to leave the location and work in the town. Permit fees were gradually introduced for those using the facilities at the new public laundry houses.

Given the additional financial burden brought by the new permits, women suffered financial losses as some could not afford the fee to use the facilities. The special permit for public bathhouses is what is said to have finally triggered the widespread protest in 1913. It is estimated that by 1913 women had to carry 13 permits (pers. comm. Frene Ginwala 2005).

The pass laws/permits were in general introduced and implemented by the local municipalities. Consequently, there were many variations to the adherence, levels of stringent application and the actual system they took. Bloemfontein was no exception in this regard. African nationalists and other black political figures routinely appealed against these laws and regulations, calling for their repeal.

When these passes were extended to women, they protested. After a number of appeals to the Orange Free State authorities to do away with the restrictive regulations yielded no fruit, women went to the higher offices of the national government. Armed with more than 5 000 signatures, a delegation of six women went to the Union Parliament in Cape Town. Dr Walter Rubusana, a member of the Cape Parliament and an African nationalist, and Senator WP Schreiner, a liberal parliamentarian who was sympathetic to Africans, facilitated the meetings between the women's delegation and Minister of Finance Henry Burton and other key politicians. Assuring the women of their sympathy, the national ministers undertook to see to it that the laws were modified. They did, however, stress that the matter was in the hands of the provincial government (Wells 1993).

However, the response of the black male political figures to the women's initiative was mixed. Through his column in the African People's (formerly Political) Organisation (APO) newsletter, Dr Abdul Abdurahman scolded women for 'acting on their own and not consulting their leadership' (Wells 1993: 40). In his own column, Sol Plaatje cautioned women that they were entering into a 'complex and dangerous arena' (*Tsala ea Batho* 6 April 1913).

Back in Bloemfontein, women continued with their protests and pushed for the suspension of the regulations, despite the sceptical and patronising attitudes of their male counterparts. They met the municipal and provincial officials who put the blame on the national government.

*Babevelaphi?* (From whence did they come?) we ask in awe as we revisit the events of that period. In many historical records, the 1913 protest is not fully analysed and often

it is represented as if it simply happened without any prior warning. In fact, it is clear from the foregoing that although the march seemed spontaneous, there was a long build-up which culminated in the march after several attempts to have the laws stopped.

That the march took the newly formed SANNC leadership by surprise is an understatement. Women had been busy mobilising and had built connections across the different ethnic and racial categories, but their male counterparts had not taken them seriously. Women had learned much by observing and also trying smaller campaigns and protests. They had seen the Indian satyagraha movement and were greatly inspired by it. Women started their own civil disobedience and built strong ties between African and Coloured women (see Gasa 2002; Ginwala 1990; Walker 1991; Wells 1993).

In May 1913 things came to a new level with the local authorities passing tough legislation on passes. In that month alone, the arrests for pass infringement quadrupled. Besides the expense of acquiring monthly permits, the process itself was often exhausting and bruising to women, who had to spend time in long queues. Given the decision by the local authorities to enforce the regulations without regard for previous agreements not to victimise women, women decided that the time had come to take more concrete steps.

### The women respond

Six hundred daughters of South Africa taught the arrogant whites a lesson that will never be forgotten...they marched to the magistrate, hustled the police out of their way and kept shouting and cheering until His Worship emerged from his office to address them, thence they proceeded to the Town Hall. The women now assumed a threatening attitude. The police endeavoured to keep them off the steps of the hall. Sticks could be seen flourishing overhead and some came down with no gentle thwacks across the skulls of the police. 'We have done with pleading, we now demand,' declared the women. (APO newsletter June 1913)

In a mass meeting held in Waaihoek on 28 May, women decided to take the unprecedented action of embarking on a passive resistance campaign. They had undertaken deputations and written petitions and appeals to the local and national government to highlight the burden of the passes. The women were now done with pleading, as their slogan announced when they marched to the offices of the mayor.

Two hundred angry women left the meeting and marched to the centre of white Bloemfontein, carrying placards, their voices raised, announcing for all to hear, 'Away with the passes. We are not carrying them any more...' (*Tsala ea Batho* June 1913).

In town, they demanded to see the mayor, Ivan Haarburger. In a style that was to be repeated 43 years later, in Pretoria by Strijdom who refused to see the women of 1956, the Bloemfontein mayor was not available to meet the women. The women went back to the location. A small delegation of women went back the following day. Haarburger told the women the pass law was the responsibility of the Union government and so the

matter was out of the local authority's decision-making powers. (This was in direct contrast to what Burton had told the women's delegation earlier, that the local authority made these decisions.)

During a report-back meeting by the delegation, women determined they were not satisfied with the response of the mayor. They decided then and there to take more serious and urgent action. On the evening of 29 May 1913 they went to the location police station, where they took out their passes, tore and burned them. Eighty women were arrested.

*Babevelaphi?* Who were these black women, who dared to march in the centre of 'white Bloemfontein', one of the most conservative and racially oppressive places in South Africa in 1913? What drove them? Writing about these women, Wells states (citing Walker):

The women who resisted pass laws in Bloemfontein bore little resemblance to the majority of black women in South Africa. They were urbanised, ethnically heterogeneous...were devoutly Christian and relatively well educated. (Wells 1993: 16)

However, both Walker and Wells also write about the difficult conditions that these women were subjected to. While Walker (1991) critiques the framing of the protest against the passes for its location of women within the domestic sphere, she acknowledges the significance of the passes not only in relation to women, but also in relation to the broader politico-economic history of South Africa. The march took place shortly before the enactment of the Land Act.

The issue of identity and the entry of women into the political scene as mothers and wives is engaged with more fully in Chapter 8 of this volume. Suffice to say, Walker's argument is problematic on many levels. Of relevance for now is the composition of women who were involved in the march. According to Wells, almost 50 per cent of the women who participated in the protest were of working-class origin. This is further supported by Sol Plaatje's comments that 'forty working women were kept away from their work...' and '...dozens of domestic workers failed to take up their positions beside the stoves...' (Limb 2003: 39). It is therefore obvious that the women who participated in that march were of multi-class and multi-ethnic origins, including a significant number of Coloured women.

The very nature of the campaign, what triggered it, and the purchase of permits for the use of public bathhouses indicate a group of multi-class women, with those of working-class origins in the majority. The range of permits which women had to acquire – stand permits, residential passes, visitors' passes, seeking work passes, employment registration certificates, permits to reside on employers' premises and entertainment permits – reveals the multi-class nature of the black population in Bloemfontein. One of those who travelled to Bloemfontein from elsewhere was Josie Palmer (who came from Potchefstroom), a member of the Communist Party of South Africa. Charlotte Maxeke (nee Manye) later also travelled to Bloemfontein to join the women in the Free State.

Walker (1993) also writes that while Coloured women worked with Africans in the beginning, this was not repeated in later marches. Again, this does not seem to take account of the composition of the women's protest group in Potchefstroom and later in other parts of the country.

Many writers, including Willan (1984), who have examined Plaatje's writings from this time, have tended to focus on his statements which confirm his pro-British empire and middle-class outlook. Unfortunately, the frequent citing of Plaatje has tended to erase the presence of other women referred to earlier in this chapter. The emphasis on the middle-class composition of the people that were reported on by Plaatje has also obscured the militant nature of the women's protests in 1913, a campaign which went on until the following year. The silence on working women and poor women has also created a skewed understanding of South African women's political history and struggle.

While this chapter is not intended as a detailed study on the march itself, considerable time has been spent looking at a different aspect of the march and the women who undertook it. Issues of women's entry into the political space needs further probing (for more on this, see Chapter 8 in this volume).

Of great relevance here is the importance of the 1913 march in the political trajectory of South African women. One of the significant developments that arose out of the march was the emergence of women's organisations, especially the Bantu Women's League (BWL). Walker argues that one of 'the most tangible results of the 1913 march was the emergence of the Bantu Women's League' (1991: 32). This is a point that has been made by other scholars and historians, including Walshe (1970), Ginwala (1990), Wells (1993) and others.

One cannot help feeling uncomfortable with the use of the phrase 'the most tangible result'. The importance of the 1913 march and its impact on other anti-pass struggles elsewhere, including in Senekal, Kroonstad, Potchefstroom and the Rand, cannot be overemphasised.

However, there are two further issues of great political and historical significance in relation to the 1913 march. The first relates to the method of protest. While the 1913 march has tended to be seen as an act of passive resistance in historical works, a closer scrutiny reveals a different picture.

What impact did this march have on the nationalist movement and other anti-imperial campaigners? We can glean from Abdurahman's comments that despite some reservations, some of these men were also ashamed that women had taken this militant step first, before they 'who are supposed to be made of sterner stuff' (APO newsletter May 1913). We can also conclude from Sol Plaatje's comment, 'Let them build more gaols' (*Tsala ea Batho* June 1913), that there was an air of defiance and pride at what the women had done.

What was the impact on women themselves? Walker significantly points to the silence (or what I would call muted voices) of women of 1913. But we also know, from the manner in which they refused to pay the jail fines, that the power of their action

went far beyond what Ms IK Cross of the suffragette movement referred to ‘as an amusing incident’ (Walker 1991: 31). Judging from the manner in which the women turned up on 6 June 1913, ‘the day that should never be forgotten in South Africa’ (APO newsletter 10 June 1913), it is clear that the matter was of no amusement to them.

On the day of the court appearance of the mass of women who had been arrested, 600 other women marched from Waaihoek to the court singing and dancing in solidarity with those who had been arrested. In the leadership was a certain Mrs Molisapoli, who wrapped herself in the Union Jack. The use of the Union Jack is of interest. Many historians have taken this to be related to the attitude of the nationalist men towards the empire. From this it can be argued that women were appealing to that power, from which they hoped to get support against the Afrikaner’s oppressive practices.

I do not have an explanation myself. On the one hand, women may have been taking their cue from the nationalist leaders and appealing to the empire. This is the dominant reading of this symbolic action, in keeping with the argument that the nationalists looked to the empire to save them. But could there be other readings? Perhaps there is a more subversive (even if it is in the use of irony) reading of the symbolic wrapping in the Union Jack. Perhaps Mrs Molisapoli was protesting against the empire, or using the symbol of power to state her belonging and citizenship of South Africa, then a British territory.

This leads to the second political issue of significance that arises out of Walker’s description of the ‘most tangible results’ of the 1913 march. I suggest the women’s action had an unquantifiable but probably more powerful impact, notwithstanding the fact that shortly after the march the Land Act was introduced. This powerful impact is related to the notion of the power of action (and sometimes deliberate silence) by the subaltern, which has been written about by many, including Said, Chatterjee and James Baldwin.

When the oppressed begin to speak, to take action against their oppression, they are no longer victims, they have moved a step closer to their own self liberation.  
(Baldwin 1963: 8)

## **Conditions in prison**

Following the mass arrests of 1913, Plaatje visited women in prison where he discovered the ‘shocking’ treatment and the conditions under which they were kept. Some of the jails were overcrowded, with some women arrested with their babies. There was not enough food and what there was, was simply inedible (*Tsala ea Batho* 8 June 1913). He also commented:

some of the most refined women of our society are negotiating pebbles and cement floor with the bare skins of their feet. Their boots and shoes have been taken away...they have to brave the icy Bloemfontein weather...many have been kept away from their work and many a domestic worker did not show up in their place of work, near the stoves in kitchens. . . (*Tsala ea Batho* 8 June 1913)

Like their counterparts in the nationalist movement, educated and middle-class women were highly visible and often assumed leadership. But it is important to stress the multiple class origins of the women who were involved in the early protests. In many ways, these multi-class connections have been a fixture of South African women's political life. Race and gender oppressions have forced women to overcome barriers of class and to work together for a common goal. That is not to say there were no differentiations amongst women. However, heterogeneous as they were, the women of the early twentieth century negotiated a difficult terrain not only in prison, but also in the predominantly white and male political terrain.

There is no evidence of women's contestation of overtly political positions in the early period. For African nationalist men, franchise was seen as a priority in order to escape their subordinate status. Women, on the other hand, appear to have been driven into the public political space by issues that were of *immediate relevance in their daily lives*. The end result was a politicisation and a militancy that took South Africa by surprise.

The sentenced women refused to pay the fines, a position publicly supported by Sol Plaatje. Referring to the overflowing prisons which could not contain the women – they had to serve their sentences in turns – Plaatje cried out in his column, 'Let them build new gaols...It is no disgrace to occupy them for your liberty' (*Tsala ea Batho* 8 June 1913).

By now, even those who had been sceptical expressed admiration and solidarity with the women. In the APO newsletter, Abdurahman wrote:

We, the men who are supposed to be made of sterner stuff than the weaker sex, might well hide our faces in shame, and ponder in some secluded spot over the heroic stand made by daughters of Africa...We docilely accept almost every abject position and submit to every brutality of the white men with little more than a murmur. Not so our women. They have accepted the white man's challenge and have openly defied him to do his worst. (APO newsletter May 1913)

### **Implications of the Bloemfontein march**

White South African powers have always played complex political games of manipulation with women. In this case, fearing widespread resistance elsewhere, inspired by the successful campaign of women of Bloemfontein, they suspended the enforcement of the pass system.

It was a tactical withdrawal to defuse the situation and to buy some time in the face of women's unprecedented anger. The success of the Bloemfontein protest cannot be measured by whether the pass system was finally abolished or not. It had far greater impact than was immediately obvious. Women had gone where men had not dared to tread before. Nelson Mandela wrote in his biography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, '...the Indian Congress inspired us and helped Africans overcome the stigma associated with prison...' (Mandela 1994: 129). Long before the Defiance Campaign of 1952, which

Mandela says was the turning point for African people's attitude to prison, women had been jailed and had refused to pay fines. These women struggled on their own, and at times with their male counterparts, as was the case in the Rand 1919 anti-pass campaigns.

While the protest did not stop the introduction of passes, it had a long-term political impact on the nationalist struggle as a whole and on women in other parts of the country.

## Potchefstroom

While the state was forced to make a tactical retreat in Bloemfontein, it proceeded with the pass regulations in other parts of the country.

In Potchefstroom, the pass system was swiftly and firmly put in place. Although levels of urbanisation increased, the economy did not grow as fast as that of Bloemfontein. The city experienced a labour surplus and the pass system was used as means of curbing the entry of African people into the city through the introduction of residential permits, known as lodger's permits. These permits were introduced under the guise of a source of revenue, even though the Native Revenue Account – into which the permit went – was in surplus. The purpose of the Native Revenue Account was to take care of services, such as water and other basic necessities. Already financially squeezed from the shortage of employment opportunities and the taxes they had to pay for being in the city, the lodger's permit was seen as the last straw. People saw through the pretence of the need to build up the Native Revenue Account and vehemently opposed the introduction of a law that locked them out of economic activity and homes. The fiscal argument did not hold and the law backfired.

The lodger's fee, although not specifically aimed at women, hurt them most. They earned less than everybody else. To supplement their income, many rented out rooms to migrant workers. The introduction of the lodger's fee meant that these workers now had to pay a higher fee. Unable to cope with the additional burden and the scarcity of work opportunities, many migrant labourers left for Johannesburg and other areas. Women lost an important source of revenue. In addition, they had to buy lodger's permits on a monthly basis for themselves and their offspring (the permit covered children separately). The rationale behind purchasing permits for being in the city was based on the notion that the urban geopolitical and economic space belonged to white people. Africans were allowed there only if they were contributing or necessary to commerce. Otherwise, they now belonged in the reserves. Family ties and the stability of communities were severely disturbed.

Women beer brewers, whose illicit trade contributed to their income, suffered great loss from the migration from Potchefstroom. Also, with the additional financial burden, there was no spare cash for beer, so business decreased drastically. And under the prevailing conditions and the political climate, the illicit brewers were closely watched by government officials.

In March 1929, the Potchefstroom City Council revived a section of the city by-laws that empowered the council to repossess huts or houses in the location if the owners fell behind with their rents. This, in addition to the lodger's permit fees, put poor residents and women in an extremely desperate position.

Women (and some men) acted swiftly, and widespread protest broke out. In addition to the inspiration from the earlier protests in Bloemfontein, there was another dynamic in Potchefstroom – the presence of the CPSA. Given the rising levels of poverty and dislocation, the CPSA in Potchefstroom was growing rapidly under the leadership of Josie Palmer (Mpama), Thabo Edwin Mafutsanyana and Mr SM Kutu.

Meanwhile the driving force behind the introduction of the lodgers' tax and other measures was Superintendent JJ Weeks, who took the existence of the CPSA as a personal insult and whose style was particularly confrontational. The combination of a growing white authoritarianism and the attempt to 'drive the red menace out' (Wells 1993: 67) made for an explosive situation.

The local CPSA invited guest speakers who toured the area, addressing crowds in large public gatherings. Amongst these guests was James Thaele, a Lincoln University graduate who had been impressed by Garveyism in his stay in the United States. Leader of the CPSA, Douglas Wolton also toured the area and was attacked by white conservatives. Weeks and others hated the idea of a white man not only mixing with black people, but also going so far as joining them in their struggle.

While the protests in Potchefstroom were not embarked upon by women alone, they give us an important insight into the growing political consciousness at the time. In their earlier campaigns, women had focused mainly on the issues that affected them, although they always had a political response. Now they were directly connected to a concretely political organisation, the CPSA.

The alliance with the CPSA was also costly to women however, as the authorities' visceral response to what they called the 'red menace' elicited severe brutality. A severe blow was struck against protesters when police opened fire on a large gathering of black men and women on 'Dingaan's Day'. A massacre took place in Potchefstroom that day, much earlier than the 1961 Sharpeville massacre, and over 100 people were killed (MPCM 23 December 1929).

Women were at the forefront of the general strikes and other campaigns that followed the massacre. Josie Palmer, who had travelled to Bloemfontein to participate in the 1913 march, emerged as a fierce and fearless leader in Potchefstroom.

The CPSA was another avenue for women's direct political participation in the mid-twentieth century and the relationship between the anti-pass campaign and political mobilisation is an area that needs closer examination.

## Women's multiple identities and politicisation

In Potchefstroom as elsewhere in the country, women's multiple identities and their triple oppression – through the intersection of race, gender and class – informed their political choices and activism.

While in their earlier petitions and protests women often struck out on their own, there was a gradual change, with women and men increasingly acting together. In the 1919 anti-pass campaign in the Transvaal, women joined their male counterparts in solidarity. Also, the earlier mass protests by women had inspired men, so the women's campaigns had a gradual but definite radicalising effect on men's approaches (Gasa 2003).

Potchefstroom demonstrates this joining of forces very acutely. Working with the CPSA also broadened women's consciousness on the linkages between their plight and the broader struggles against dispossession and poverty. The women's anti-pass struggle was tied to the community struggle through their reliance on the informal economy, including on their lodgers.

What is instructive about the Bloemfontein and Potchefstroom marches in particular, are the similarities in the militancy of the women's responses. The triggers of the protests are also illuminating, as they tell us about black women's struggle for economic survival for themselves and their families.

Our women in general have overworked themselves and are still doing so by taking bundles of washing...in order to add to their husbands' meagre salaries so as to make ends meet. Nobody can deny that Natives live in semi-starvation. The women are thin and sickly. The children are emaciated and ill-clad. (*The Herald* 14 March 1930)

Elsewhere on the continent, women who suffered similar plights, especially those encountering stringent policies and taxes that impoverished them, responded in similar fashion.

In Nigeria, the Sole Native Authority (SNA), a British colonial administrative power, introduced a special income tax for market women. In that country, women had been active in trade as far back as the mercantile period. Dual income households were a norm, especially in the southern parts of the country. The new tax drove already struggling market women out of their small businesses. In a fashion similar to that of their sisters in Bloemfontein, women responded by travelling from all over the country to converge on the seat of the SNA. The women's militancy and resourcefulness was etched deeply in the mind of the young man who later became a writer, Wole Soyinka. He has captured it eloquently in his boyhood memoir (Soyinka 1981).

Their method of organising, which brought together women from all the different parts of the country, took the Native Congress of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) – the leading nationalist movement – by surprise. Like their brothers on the southern tip of the continent, the predominantly male nationalist movement was unfamiliar with mass protest; they were used to sending deputations and petitions to the empire.

The women's siege of the SNA office was so dramatic and prolonged that both the state and the nationalist leaders were initially immobilised by shock. Given the deep ethnic cleavages in the Nigerian psyche, including within the NCNC (which later became the National Council of Nigeria), a national campaign was no small achievement.

Despite their multiple identities and roles, women came with their children and attempted to trade and exchange goods amongst themselves. Soyinka captures a particularly moving scene he witnessed as he observed the women. A woman went into labour in front of the SNA offices. Women got her near a tree and they were busy, fussing, shouting, cajoling and excited when the bloody head of the baby emerged (Soyinka 1981). The women went about their business – protest politics, economic survival and giving birth all at the same time. This illustrates that adoption of one role – militant protest – need not negate other identities, including mothering.

The similarities in the women's reactions to their plights are not only in relation to the militant responses, which are of great significance, but also point to the fact that there seem to have been women on this continent who were ahead of their political times.

What drove these women in South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana and Zimbabwe – as seen in their liberation movements – into the political struggles? How did they straddle their different locations, being wife, mother, daughter, and their political roles? Why did the women in South Africa rebel against the passes?

The answer that is often given – that women responded to issues that touched their lives directly – while plausible, is also too easy. For one thing, from these first steps against the passes there grew a need for organisation and platforms that were political as well as politicising for women.

Some historians have argued that women conceded the political space to men (Walker 1991; Wells 1993). While this may be the case, does the 1913 women's march not raise immediate questions about the political belonging exclusively to men? Did the women not there and then directly challenge their exclusion from the public domain? Is it not true that while they did not usually build strong organisations, they claimed elements of those political spaces? It does not follow, that from the earlier protests, women had to build organisations. There could have been specific reasons initially militating against this, for example, the isolation experienced in domestic service. Moreover, while activities may have been sporadic, they did attempt to build the Bantu Women's League.

## The emergence of the Bantu Women's League

Much has been written on the exclusion of women from the SANNC:

[T]here appears to have been no demand from women for membership and they did not consider the SANNC and its provincial affiliates as viable political vehicles to mobilise its own campaigns. A pattern had been established of grass-roots mobilisation and participation by women... (Ginwala 1990: 6)

However, it is important to acknowledge that women participated in SANNC and ANC meetings even though they did not have formal membership. In some of the records of the meetings at branch, provincial and national levels, there are accounts of presentations by women. They spoke on varied subjects. At one meeting, a lone woman speaker is reported to have chastised congress for its jubilee celebrations when it had no money to run the organisation properly (Bunche 1937). In that same meeting, Ginwala records, another speaker, a Mrs Peters, moved a resolution that the Wages and Conciliation Act be amended to make all wage determinations apply to African workers in all industries (Ginwala 1990).

From fine-combing the archives and the footnotes in major historical works on the ANC, Ginwala makes a powerful argument that although women did not have formal membership until 1943, they were *de facto* members who participated fully, including in leadership elections. The manner in which Ginwala looks at the question of membership and political participation departs radically from that of many feminist historians, who have tended to look at the question of formal constitutional status as a confirmation of actual participation.

Walker concedes this point albeit in a qualified way when she states that: ‘while she [Ginwala] criticises me for misrepresenting this relationship, her overall conclusion does converge with mine, after 1943 [women] still fell short of . . . achieving equal power and status with the men’ (Walker 1991: xii). Contrary to Walker’s assertion that ‘there is silence on women in the ANC’ in the early 1900s (1991: 34), Ginwala shows the much more complex presence of women.

There is no doubt that the question of formal and full membership status is an important one. It also points to some of the contradictory language (and practice) of nationalist men in relation to the status and role of women in the liberation struggle. However, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding here, which takes into account that ‘formal absence’ does not signify ‘real absence’, while ‘formal membership’ may also not mean ‘real and effective participation’.

The complexity of African women’s political struggle calls for an approach that examines the spaces in-between; the vast grey areas which are rich and complex with women’s real experiences must be explored fully. This debate is taken further and explored in more depth in Chapter 8 of this volume.

Suffice to say here that there is evidence of a relationship between women’s struggles and initiatives and the mostly male nationalist movements. For example, in 1914 the SANNC resolved to suspend political action because of the world war. Women in Bloemfontein and elsewhere suspended their actions in recognition of this resolution.

Often, women did not consider themselves in opposition to the malestream nationalist movement. On the contrary, they acted on their own and when necessary relied on or called upon men’s solidarity.

In East London in the early part of the century, women gathered in the town hall to speak of their hardship. Amongst their grievances was the question of the scarcity of

work, such as doing laundry and housework which was now being taken over by Indian men (*Izwi laBantu* 8 August 1908). RW Rubusana was appointed as interpreter between the women and the city council officials. *Izwi laBantu* congratulated the women for the dignified and graceful manner in which they had conducted themselves. However, when a second meeting occurred, the women removed Rubusana and spoke directly to the officials. This time they were not polite. They had given the council an opportunity and now they were fed up.

According to reports in *Izwi laBantu* and by Odendaal (1984), the issues raised by women related to their economic status and survival, including concerns about Indian men who were encroaching into their area of economic activity, and thus further squeezing women out of their small corners of economic activity – at least that is how the women saw it.

While in many ways it can be correctly argued that women's assertions were not necessarily feminist and that they further entrenched women in traditional roles and traditional female economic spheres, the times and context in which these protests took place must always be borne in mind. Also, the protection of women's right to work is in fact a feminist issue in itself.

Such incidents of direct representation were very common in the mid-twentieth century. It was not so much a stand against men *per se*, but more a stand for themselves, on their own as women, and sometimes together with men.

The formation of the BWL was almost inevitable. The time was right and women were ripe to be organised and to take a more active and structured role in the politics of the day. Through their anti-pass campaigns, women had shown that they could organise politically and independently.

Clearly, the earlier marches had had a snowball effect on women across the country. In the small towns of Weenen and Greytown a wave of protests by women were taking place. They challenged a number of issues, including the opening of beer halls, which once again threatened their economic interests. In Germiston, Potchefstroom and other small towns, women joined forces with men against different forms of residential or lodger's permits (see Roux 1978).

An area that offered greater and fuller activity for women was the trade unions (see Iris Berger in this volume; Bradford 1987). Technically, the rules that barred 'pass-bearing people' from activity in the unions did not include women, as the government had not succeeded in extending passes to women.

Charlotte Maxeke is one of the women activists whose public and political life spanned a greater part of the early to mid-twentieth century. Having been exposed to American education and trained under WEB Du Bois<sup>2</sup> (unlike many others, who trained under Booker T Washington), Maxeke used her training to promote better living conditions for African women.

Walker's assertion that 'the 1913–14 anti-pass campaign had nothing to do with the women's rights movement then rocking the western world and to which South African

suffragists looked' (Walker 1991: 32), is astonishing. Feminist writers have long probed the issue of cross-fertilisation and the impossibility of a total cut-off of one culture, civilisation, and political wave from another.

It is well documented that the early nationalist leaders, including women of Maxeke's stature, were inspired by the various ideological schools of thought they encountered in their travels abroad. While it is clear that the anti-pass campaigns were a result of immediate and pressing issues that affected women, this does not necessarily mean that they were immune to other influences prevailing at the time. The most we can say at this stage is that we really do not know what effect other influences may have had.

Unfortunately, dominant historical works are not really helpful here, as this area is not probed. It is important to stress that I am not at pains to make connections where none may have existed but, similarly, to express a final judgement either way is problematic.

The BWL, of which Maxeke was then president, joined the women of the Orange Free State in some of their protests and deputations. In the fashion of the predominant political engagement of the time, both in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent, the BWL adopted the strategy of deputations and representation to the authorities on specific legislation. In 1918 Maxeke led a delegation that went to meet Prime Minister Louis Botha to present the women's protest. In keeping with the response of the national government to earlier delegations on behalf of Africans, no legislative review was undertaken. Rather, Botha contacted the Free State officials and asked them to relax their enforcement.

The BWL was affiliated to the ANC, following the latter's granting of auxiliary status to women. As demonstrated earlier, the issue of membership and participation was much more complex than many historians have described.

From the beginning, the BWL had two major challenges that in the long run weakened it. The first had to do with the context and times during which it emerged. As an organisation that fell under the auspices of the ANC in the time of the complex issue of membership, the BWL's wings were somewhat clipped. It did not have the organisational capacity and experience to lead women who seemed far ahead of their male counterparts, even if not in formal political engagements with the government and the empire. The women had clarity and impatience on matters that affected them. In many ways, the history of the BWL was weighed down by the very patriarchal nature of political activity at the time.

The second challenge that confronted the BWL was its emergence as part of the ANC during the latter's weakest period. This had an all-round effect on the activities and organisational structures, not only of the BWL but also of the ANC itself. Given the overall state of the organisation to which the BWL was affiliated, it is not surprising that the organisation was effectively weak. Also, the complexity of the official status of women in the ANC as auxiliary members – Ginwala's arguments notwithstanding – did have an effect on the roles they played. As in other anti-colonial contexts, women were largely relegated to catering and other supportive roles which conformed to the dominant patriarchal attitudes.

Having said this, to conclude that women were handmaidens of the nationalist movement would be a crude and superficial reading. While the BWL's experience reveals the contradictory positions of women in that era, it is important to be aware at all times that it is possible to straddle different spaces and to weave from one position to the other.

It is worth noting, to buttress the point above, that Charlotte Maxeke, the then president of the BWL, participated in the All Africa Convention (AAC) of 1935 as one of the speakers. The BWL was the only women's organisation invited to the AAC. The AAC was called to discuss the Hertzog Bills before Parliament. The two Bills had far-reaching implications for Africans. They touched on the questions of franchise, citizenship and the position of Africans in the geopolitical space of South Africa, as defined by white people at the time.

It is also noteworthy that the two main Bills which precipitated the calling of the AAC were not about women only or specifically. They affected the general African population and its standing in the white South African political and economic spaces. One of the Bills was aimed at (and succeeded in) removing the few remaining Africans from the voters' roll (the exempted ones, who qualified in the Cape).

The second Bill became the notorious Native Reserves Act, which consolidated the plans of formalising and driving Africans into reserves. Thus both Bills were in many ways the final nail in the coffin of a process that had taken almost 20 years, beginning with the Land Act of 1913. Africans were now not only disposed of their land, but were also specifically being assigned to ethnic enclaves. That did not only marginalise them economically; the social, psychological and political dimensions continue to dominate contemporary discourse on citizenship, identity and the national question.

The invitation of the BWL to this convention goes beyond the 'honour given to Maxeke' (Walker 1991: 35). It suggests the place that African women were beginning to secure in the public political life of the nationalist movements, despite the predominantly patriarchal attitudes which prevailed.

However, while the ANC was reactivated during the protest against the Hertzog Bills, the BWL did not manage to have long-term rejuvenation. Amongst the resolutions of the AAC was one which called for the formation of an 'African Council of Women along...lines similar to those of other races' (Karis & Carter 1973: Vol 2, 39).

## The National Council of African Women

The National Council of African Women (NCAW), whose foundations were laid by African women who met before the AAC in 1935 was launched under the leadership of Maxeke. These women wanted an organisation that would look after their welfare (Karis & Carter 1973: Vol 2). Similar structures were formed in other parts of the country. The NCAW, as an amalgamation of different councils, was clearly not a political organisation,

although it took up political issues. Its main concerns were the welfare of African women and their families.

The NCAW liaised with other councils, especially the white National Council of Women (NCW). The terminology used here gives some insight into the thinking of the time. The white women's council was known as the NCW, with no indication of its limited racial base. This suggests yet another area in the discourse of race and representation and assumed status and location which needs further probing. Important as it is, it is not an area of focus in this chapter. The relationship between white and black women and the fragile sisterhood in South Africa and elsewhere remains an area that needs a nuanced and complex understanding.

The NCAW participated in the Joint Councils Movement, of which its white counterpart, the NCW, was a member. A relationship between the two councils developed and some African nationalists expressed concern that the NCAW might be under the influence of white liberals. What liberal white males thought of these developing links has not been recorded.

What is clear is that some African women were conscious of the concerns of the African nationalist men and the assumed dominance by white liberals. The president of the NCAW, Mrs TM Soga, wrote to Mrs Rheinalt-Jones of the NCW in response to the latter's utterances on the NCAW's role and direction: 'There is a belief amongst Africans that the NCAW is run by whites. I hope you have not strengthened this view' (Walker 1991: 35). Under whose influence was the NCAW? This is a matter that exercised the minds not only of the nationalist men but also of other women, including CPSA activist Josie Palmer.

Women of all races were emerging as a political force in the mid-twentieth century. Some were making their mark in the CPSA and in the trade union movement, while others were engaging with nationalist politics. The NCAW was a contested space, reflecting the different strands of political thought within the nationalist movement at the time.

Three main contestations of the role and identity of the NCAW came from three major strands of political thought at the time. The first was expressed by some male nationalists (as seen in Mrs Soga's letter) that the NCAW's increasing independence and its alliance with NCW could have a radicalising effect on African women.

The second was articulated by women like Charlotte Maxeke who were at pains to link the anti-pass struggles and other political campaigns with the welfare of African women. Walker is particularly concerned about Maxeke's standpoint, seeing this as a depoliticisation of the NCAW. Others would read this as an important linkage, which was perhaps not fully developed both in thinking and implementation. Maxeke came from the AME church and this often informed her approaches.

The third strand was encapsulated in Josie Palmer's insistence that the NCAW had to play a more prominent and radical role politically. The NCAW was seen by Palmer as having failed in its objectives and as being generally ineffectual. (Walker, 1991).

Like its predecessor, the BWL, it was short lived. Once again, the significance of the NCAW and that of earlier women's organisations cannot be assessed independent of their times. It is clear that all these organisations and campaigns had serious shortcomings. Amongst these were resources and the decisions they had taken in positioning themselves in relation to the state and the nationalist movement. However, the overall impact on the growing political consciousness amongst South African women, and African women in particular is an area of great historical relevance. The phasing out of the NCAW coincided with the change of the ANC constitution, which granted women full membership in 1943.

## Different ways of swimming and removing boulders

This chapter has in a limited way traced the entry of black women into the political arena.

It is clear that to make claims on the ideological positions of these earlier women is a dangerous pastime. Theirs is an evolving history of different positions and locations. But an issue of centrality is the anti-pass campaigns in the struggles, mobilisation and organisation of women. I argue that the passes were not opposed only because they related to the primacy of women as mothers and wives. Many African women who were affected by the passes came from poor backgrounds. Women were simply fed up with the passes because of their implications for their livelihoods and, yes, their families too. Chapter 8 in this volume explores this in more depth.

This chapter intended to show a growing political consciousness, a linkage between personal struggles against marginalisation and the broader political debates. It also attempted to show that African women, contrary to dominant claims in feminist historiography, were neither silent nor cowered by either the state or their male counterparts in the nationalist movement.

Despite the limitations of these earlier organisations and the scope of their campaigns, theirs was a constant struggle to swim against the dominant tide. The tide was that of invisibility, erasure and disregard and this, sadly, came from all sources, including the suffragist movement. The generations that came after them, including the contemporary black feminist thinkers, continue to push their own boulders, building on what has gone before.

## NOTES

- 1 Black here is as used by Wells in her book. My own use of blackness includes all people of colour – Coloureds, Indians and Africans.
- 2 Dr WEB du Bois is known as a radical and erudite Marxist scholar.

## REFERENCES

- Baard F (as told to Barbara Schreiner) (1986) *My spirit is not banned*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Baldwin J (1992) *The fire next time* (Reissue edition, first published 1963). New York: Vintage
- Bambara TC (1960) *On the question of roles*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Bradford H (1987) *A taste of freedom: The ICU in rural South Africa, 1924–1930*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bunche R (1937) Diary of a visit to South Africa. Unpublished manuscript.
- Clingman S (1998) *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner revolutionary*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Gasa N (2003) Naming the problem. Unpublished manuscript
- Ginwala F (1990) Women and the African National Congress 1912–1943. *Agenda* 8: 77–93.
- Joseph H (1986) *Side by side: The autobiography of Helen Joseph*. New York: William Morrow.
- Karis T & Carter GM (Eds) (1973) *From protest to challenge: A documentary History of African politics in South Africa, 1882–1964*, Vol 2. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press
- Limb P (2003) Sol Plaatje reconsidered. *African Studies*, 62(1): 33–52.
- Mama A (1997) Sheroes and villains: Conceptualising colonial and contemporary violence against women in Africa. In J Alexander & C Talpade Mohanty (Eds) *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*. New York: Routledge.
- Mandela Nelson (1994) *Long walk to freedom: The autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. Johannesburg: Macdonald Purnell.
- Moraga C & Anzaldúa G (Eds) (1983) *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press.
- Odendaal A (1984) *Vukani Bantu! The beginnings of black protest politics in South Africa to 1912*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Resha M (1991) *Mangoana o tsoara thipa ka bohaleng: My life in the struggle*. Johannesburg: COSAW.
- Rich A (1993) *What is found there: Notebooks on poetry and politics*. New York: Norton.
- Roux E (1978) *Time longer than rope: A history of the black man's struggle for freedom in South Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Soyinka W (1981) *Ake: The years of childhood*. London: Rex Collings
- Walker C (1991) *Women and resistance in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip (First published 1982, London: Onyx Press).
- Walshe P (1970) *The rise of African nationalism in South Africa. The African National Congress 1912–1952*. London: Hurst.
- Wells JC (1993) *We now demand! The history of women's resistance to pass laws in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Willan B (1984) *Sol Plaatje: A biography*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press

## ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

- APO Newsletter*, April, 29 May and 10 June (1913)
- Plaatje S *Tsala ea Batho*, 29 May, 7 June, 8 August (1913)

## OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS

- Town Council Register, Bloemfontein, 1911.

## ORGANISATIONAL RESOLUTIONS, MINUTES AND PUBLICATIONS

- All African Convention Resolutions, 1935.
- All African Convention Minutes, 1936.
- All African Convention Minutes, 1940.
- The ANC Bulletin. *Our task for 1946*.
- The African National Congress Draft Constitution, 1942.

# Testimonies and transitions: Women negotiating the rural and urban in the mid-20th century

LULI CALLINICOS

Life stories have the power to provide vibrant insights into the wider context of society. This chapter records the narratives of three South African women in the twentieth century, whose families came from rural backgrounds. The women worked and lived for substantial parts of their adult lives in the city of Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup>

The testimonies related here are played out against a history of dispossession and racial exploitation. The memories that the narrators consciously or otherwise remember – from vivid day-to-day detail to more dramatic events that prove to be turning points in their lives – have the capacity to ‘illuminate’, as Shula Marks points out, ‘more of the South African condition than the majority of history textbooks’ (Marks 1987: 5).

The testimonies of the three women – Mpelilape Martha Masina, Thokozile Virginia Mngoma and Mmapula Helen Sebidi – recall, ‘both in the tale and in the telling, the epic quality of rural, pre-literate societies where memory and story-telling are still prized cultural resources’ (Gordon 1985: xi). Their stories evoke unique, idiosyncratic identities, as well as shared selves – they are mostly conscious actors in the larger society. They also reveal the ambiguities, contradictions and complexities of personal and social relations, particularly so in a time of deep-seated dislocation in rural homesteads and urban communities throughout South Africa.

The three women are not all of the same generation, but all look back on their lives from the viewpoint of women in their sixties – two recount their reminiscences of the 1980s, while the youngest of the three, Mmapula Sebidi, recalls her life in a post-apartheid South Africa. Their remembering is an act of re-collection, of pulling together, and in that process choices are made about what is and what is not told to their specific audience. Furthermore, specific events are recollected because they were significant *at* that particular stage of their lives. Biographies, as Doris Lessing has observed, are ‘fluid, fleeting, evanescent...[a]n interim report’ (Lessing 2005: 91–92).

Revisiting the two women's testimonies of the 1980s after 20 years allowed their stories to take on a fresh meaning. Scholars in the 1980s – with a few exceptions – tended to focus on the urban challenge and to discuss the potential and relative merits of the liberation and labour movements. Much of the historiography of the left demonstrated 'the aridity of an unpeopled political economy' (Marks 1987: 1). Biography (as opposed to autobiography, which became a celebrated genre that exposed to the world the violence and ignominy of apartheid) was sparse. The impact and contribution of the traditional, rural cultures of working people, especially women, on urban survival were not rigorously or consistently interrogated through life stories.<sup>2</sup> In South Africa, social history was only just beginning to come into its own. Feminist writings, too, were starting to make a contribution to knowledge by introducing the importance of thinking holistically.

Yet half a century after the women's march against the imposition of passes and its consequences, serious concerns around survival and the economy persist. The majority of women, many rurally based, continue to be key actors in cobbling together a living in the interstices of micro-economic activities. Urban and rural households are, if anything, under greater strain today, largely owing to the legacy of the past. A mere 12 years of democracy have not significantly improved the material living conditions for most black men and women.

But contemporary South African democracy also raises less tangible issues that revolve around culture, both local and national; around shifting identities, language, ethnicity and a rich diversity that embraces all, and goes beyond the racial divide. In the broader context of globalisation, and at a time when Africa has achieved a level of independence that Femi Nzwedu celebrates as 'an incredible geo-political liberatory feat' (Nzwedu 2000: 5), a celebration of Africanism prevails. Five hundred years of colonisation, conquest and occupation have created exciting opportunities for substantial synergy, stemming from the 'interlocking layers of shared experience for all African peoples' (Nzwedu 2000: 6).

In South Africa today, the revival of studies in indigenous knowledge, both scientific and philosophical, is accompanied by a keen interest in the history of pre-colonial societies. There is also widespread public support in South Africa of national and local moves to symbolically redress imbalances. The remapping of the landscape by renaming streets, towns, hospitals and even airports has met with popular black approval. Ironically, though, young people in particular seem to have lost the memory of past horrors except in general terms. Little understanding is expressed of the actual experience of black people living in a colonial and apartheid world, perhaps because of a wish to escape from its taint. In a global context, dazzled by a new access to consumerism, most young South Africans are ignoring the collective values of their parents and grandparents. In the city especially, where there developed a syncretism formulated around tradition mixed with the impact of diverse urban and industrial experiences and cultural dialogues facilitated by migrant workers, the old syncretism is

being substituted by new ambitions, leaving behind the older generation. A process of selective forgetting has been taking place.

In reassessing the testimonies of Masina and Mngoma, I became more aware of these women's achievements in their ingenious adaptation of rural and indigenous cultures and values to protect themselves and their community in the apartheid city. My conversations with Mmapula Sebidi reveal that the foundations of her art, as well as the additional hardships that she encountered in the city in attempting to resist the erosion of her indigenous heritage and values, are also a reminder that biographies, like history, can be revisited every generation to reveal new perspectives.

Let us now turn to the testimonies of the women themselves.



### **Mpelilape Martha Masina**

The exact day when she left her family for Johannesburg was etched indelibly in the memory of Mpelilape Martha Masina:<sup>3</sup>

It was on 13 May 1939. I took the train from Middelburg, three o'clock in the night. I came to Park Station somewhere six o'clock...My friend was waiting at the station.

It was a turning point in her life for she left secretly, without the permission of the farmer, or her parents' knowledge. The move also put her parents' livelihood at risk, for they relied on the ability of their children to provide labour for the white owner of the farm, so that, as labour tenants, they could be permitted to remain on the farm.

Ever since the Land Act of 1913, which reserved 90 per cent of the land in South Africa for white ownership, the lives of black tenants and sharecroppers were rendered increasingly vulnerable. Thousands of black families were removed from white farms

after 1913, particularly from those farms whose owners decided to modernise and commercialise their enterprises.

Between the two world wars, increasing numbers of black men and later women streamed into the city, refugees from the Land Act. In Martha's father's case, unlike so many others,<sup>4</sup> he had managed to hold on to this position as a labour tenant who worked a small piece of land for his family in return for six or more months' labour to the farm owner.

Martha had been born in 1918 to a large family of 19 children to her father's two wives in the Middelburg district in the old Transvaal, though many of her siblings had died in infancy. She recalled her parents' unremitting labour in the fields, and the long working days of the children.

Child labour was not new. It had become Boer custom in the Orange Free State and Transvaal areas, since the nineteenth century wars of dispossession, to capture children – *oorlams* – remove them from their homesteads and put them to work. The children were supposed to be registered under the *inboekseling* system, which meant that children performed unpaid labour for their board and lodging until the age of 25, when their contract expired. By then, they had lost their birth names, their language and their communities. They remained dependent on the Boers, converted to Christianity and married into the existing black labour tenant population on the farms.

Martha's maternal grandparents were both *oorlams*. There were many *oorlams* in Middelburg. Her grandmother had been captured as a child:

She stayed with the *boeremense* [Boer farmers] for a *long* time...They don't talk the proper language of [their own people], they just talk Afrikaans and a little bit of [our language]...They don't know who is their chief, they're just people, just 'Barolong', they're 'Bushmen'...They can talk this Sotho but most of the time they talk Afrikaans.

The practice continued well into the twentieth century. 'The madam can bring a little boy from Kimberley,' explained Martha by way of example:

...and you ask her where does he come from. She can't tell you because she picks him up in the street. Sometimes she drives her car to Johannesburg, she just takes that child in the street and puts him in the car and comes with him and makes him big. [The child] doesn't know his name, she doesn't even know his surname. He only knows the name the madam gives him. It's a terrible thing.

Q: What did you think about these *oorlams*? Did you feel sorry for them, or did you despise them?

No we didn't. We liked them. We thought they were the best people because the *boeremense* didn't *sjambok* them [whip them with a leather quirt]. They didn't treat them bad like us.

Martha was raised by her grandmother until she was five years old and recalled the relatively affectionate relationship between her grandmother and her employers.

It was nice there; they loved me, those *boeremense*...They gave me milk and butter and cream when I was small.

Indeed the baby was so chubby that they named her 'Mpelilape', 'meaning "Ooh she's so big! Where are you going to end?"' Later she was christened in the Dutch Reformed Church, and named 'Martha', a name that became inseparable from her later identity in Johannesburg. But, despite the warm relationship between the *oorlams* and the Botha family, Martha recalled how hard the old lady worked.

When Martha turned five, she was sent to live with her parents, who were labour tenants on a farm between Belfast and Lydenberg (now in Mpumalanga). A labour tenant was defined by his obligation to provide the landowner with unpaid labour – in Masina's case for eight months of the year. In return, the tenant was granted a small plot of land which he was allowed to cultivate for himself. 'The *boeremense* where my father was, they were horrible.' As farming became more commercialised, the farm owners squeezed more productivity out of their labourers. They favoured large black tenant families – the more children, the more free labour. Martha explained:

When you come to the farm, he says, 'How many children you got?' When you move to the farm he comes to your house. You must come out, sit in front of him [so that he can] see them. Then he know how big – this one can work, I can teach her to work, this one can sweep, this one can feed the fowls, this one can feed the pigs, can go and fetch water.

Those tenants unable to provide the required scale of labour were evicted. In Martha's family, the older boys worked as farm labourers and the daughters in domestic service.

We fetch water and put it on the stove. We make the water warm, put it in the bath for the master; master must have a bath; after[wards] he must have his coffee; take it to the table, make coffee for the madam, take it to the bedroom. After the bedroom we must start to clean the house. After the house we must sweep all over, all over. We must go and feed the chickens, we must feed the pigs. We must fetch the eggs...Sometimes we were six in the kitchen. Others do the washing, then we must iron. We did the washing with the hands in the *spruit* [stream]...We used to make soap with caustic soda and fat from the pigs. Slow fire and we must stir it, then we out it in a big bath for a day...When you wash it in the *spruit*, with the soap, you put it in the sun, then it comes very white... There was the farmer, his wife and two children. No windmill, the water had to be fetched from the *spruit*. Sometimes we were playing. Then he comes with the horse to see what we are doing. When he comes with the *sjambok*, he's going to hit us!

Martha recalled one incident in particular, when the farmer's wife, the '*nonnatjie*' (young lady), burned Martha's arm with a hot iron because she, only 14 years old, was working too slowly on her mistress's pleated skirt. 'I was so cross! I was so little, and she was big.' Indignant, she pulled her mistress's hair, and they began to hit and scratch and fight. 'Baas Piet' heard the commotion and came into the kitchen. He seized the *sjambok* and whipped Mpelilape. He whipped his wife too. He berated her, for Jeremiah, Mpelilape's father, had accompanied Piet's father-in-law, old man De Lange, during the First World War.

The next morning, Martha refused to return. Her sister Letty, who had also endured beatings, also would not go back to work. Mrs Masina spoke sternly to her children. They protested that they were missing school, and even though they worked every day (even on Sundays they worked in the family field) they had no clothes. They were dressed in sacks, which their mother had hand-stitched for them.

'Baas Piet' was hostile to the idea of allowing farm children to go to school. He knew that as soon as they became literate he ran the risk of losing them to better paid work when they grew up. Eventually Martha went back to work, though Letty never returned to the farmhouse. 'Baas Piet' arrived with the *sjambok* and whipped her through her layer of sacking until he was tired. But Letty refused to budge or to cry out. Then he tried to tie a rope around her waist so that he could drag her with his horse, but she was a strong girl and fiercely resisted, despite Piet's curses. Jeremiah Masina persuaded his employer to leave her so that he could talk to her. But Letty was adamant – she would not work under those conditions. That night, when Martha returned from work, she gently rubbed her sister's welts with Vaseline.

After she told us about it, she cried a lot. Aah, but it was sore! She cried the whole night, and we patted her and patted her...In the morning, I said to my mother, you mustn't wake her. Let her sleep.

Martha's father solved the problem by taking a younger boy out of school and sending him to the farm to work as a herd boy, milking the cows, and cleaning the stables and the pigpens.

I stayed, because my father had no place to go. My father told us we must try to be good to these white people. Where we go next time is going to be the same for us.

During the period that Mpelilape was at home, the farmer's children missed her and the farmer's wife came to see her and apologise. She begged Martha to return.

After I hit her she really loved me and she was a good friend of mine. I think she loved me because I didn't care.

But the farmer's wife continued at times to beat Martha – and the children too – with the *sjambok*, which she kept nearby in the pantry. 'When she was cross with me and the children were there I put the children in front of me to protect me,' chuckled Martha.

Humour was often an effective way to try to handle the *nonnatjie's* rages, and perhaps also served as a means for Martha to manage her own indignation. Martha would also seize appropriate moments to remind her mistress that she would run away if the *nonnatjie* did not control herself.

One day, when the children were away at boarding school, Mrs de Lange took a gun and shot herself.

I don't know what happened to the madam...When the madam died I was two days at home; I couldn't get up. I don't know what was wrong, but I loved her.

Martha, drawing on her home culture of concern for and sensitivity to people, possessed an intuitive empathy for her mistress's emotional fragility; somehow, she was able to comprehend that affection and malevolence could coexist in the same person. Despite her youth, her humanity and the sudden revelation of the deep-seated pain contained in her employer's outbursts prevailed over any resentment she might have had towards the *nonnatjie*. 'She was so horrible to us, but I cried and cried...'<sup>5</sup>

When Martha and Letty were old enough, they found work as domestic servants in Middelburg. Martha earned £1 a month, and sent every second month's wage home to her parents. By then, 'Baas Piet', despite the intergenerational links of the two families, had evicted the Masina family from his farm. Why he did so is not clear. Had De Lange, too, fallen on hard times with the devastating drought that gripped most of the country in the early 1930s? Did he need to purge himself of his own memories and failures by rubbing out the black family that had been so intimate with his own susceptible kin?

Dispossessed, Jeremiah Masina was able to find another position as a labour tenant, but with a much smaller piece of ground in the district of Oogies, near Witbank. It was this move that proved to be a turning point for Martha. The new farmer sent word that he required *all* Masina's children to be working on the farm. The two smallest children were to be removed from school and put to work. Martha was instructed to hand in her notice to her madam in town and return to the farm.

It was then that her friend, home on leave from her job in Johannesburg, persuaded Martha to save her next month's pay and use it to buy a train ticket to Johannesburg. The urban economy was beginning to recover from the worldwide Depression, which had affected South Africa's nascent industries and the profitability of the gold mines. The white population was expanding – skilled immigrants from Europe were arriving, attracted to the easier life of a colony and the cheap black labour available to them as whites, both at work and at home. Domestic workers were in demand. It was usual at the time for middle-class households to employ three or four servants or more.

Martha informed the farmer that she needed to give a month's notice before she could leave her job. In reality, she kept the £1 note to buy herself a train ticket to Johannesburg. Once there, through her 'home girl' network, she was able to find work with a well-to-do white household – her mother's training and arduous work experiences in domestic service stood her in good stead.

My mother was very, very good. Our mother taught us how to work. And when we were small, our mother used to say, you must be clean, you must work. Our pots were shining. You used to take ashes to shine the pots and kettles... Sometimes we used to make polish with green vegetables – squeeze it and polish with it. We would polish the floor, make it shine.

But also, 'I learnt from the *boeremense* at home. I know how to cook [western food], I know how to clean the house, I know how to wash and iron. And I worked for that madam [in Johannesburg] for £7. It was a lot of money.'

In Martha's third job, she was one of an even larger component of staff:

I made the beds, did the dusting and then the washing. When Charlie was off I did the cooking. We were ten on the staff – Charlie, me, two houseboys who were also waiters, Miss May [the white housekeeper], four garden boys, a night watch and the white driver, Emmanuel.<sup>6</sup>

A side effect of domestic work was the tight social control exercised by the employers on the workers. Dependent on their bosses for accommodation and food, with the close proximity of their quarters to the main house, even the social and cultural lives of domestic workers' were controlled. Indigenous music was frowned upon, and visitors were forbidden or closely monitored. In addition, circumscribed by her inordinately long working hours, Martha found very little opportunity to develop friendships outside of the immediate neighbourhood. Childless after suffering a miscarriage, a child that died in infancy and several failed romances, Martha developed a deep affection for the various children in her care; she felt closer to the white families she served than to the black communities in the nearby township.

I had friends, but I didn't like the location. I knew about the Msomi gang and the Spoilers [in Alexandra township] – it was a rough place.

Lacking contact with townspeople, her only alternative experience of black society had been during her formative years on the farms. The circumscribed environment there had bred in her a mixture of obdurate determination mixed with prudence and caution, and in many ways a conservative outlook.

We shall return to Martha later in this account. In the meantime, we move to Alexandra township, a place of fear and disorder for Martha, but home to Thoko Mngoma, born and bred there, and a site of struggle for sovereignty and identity.

## Thokozile Virginia Mngoma

Since its inception in 1912, Alexandra township has always been a destination for migrants. Despite ‘influx control’ measures during the segregation and apartheid years, newcomers continued to find ways to settle in the ‘Dark City’ (so-called because it lacked electricity despite its proximity to the affluent white suburbs of Johannesburg). To this day, it continues to be described as ‘a centre for vast immigration by rural-dwellers’ (Bozzoli nd: 31).

Thoko<sup>7</sup> was a first generation townswoman. Her father was an evangelist – ‘someone who doesn’t wear a collar’ – in the Methodist church. His livelihood or calling probably implied that he did not have access to land, and he led the itinerant life of the pastor. The Reverend *Umfundisi* Mngoma had been transferred to Alexandra from Kilmerton in Tshwane, to Brakpan and then to Springs, in what was then known as the East Rand. The second of six children, Thokozile was born in Alexandra in 1919. Like so many other residents, she loved Alex and like so many others, had romantic memories of its past.<sup>8</sup> It was only one of two places in the wider perimeter of Johannesburg that permitted black ownership. It provided more facilities than the municipally controlled ‘locations’ – small shops, a clinic run by the Wits University medical school, and better protection from vindictive pass raids.

You know, Alexandra used to welcome *anybody*, doesn’t matter from where. You were not asked where you came from or what colour you were. As long as you pay your rent to the standholder, that’s all-important. Even the neighbours here, they were Coloured, Indian, Chinese, it made no difference. We lived together as one big happy family, you see.

Reverend Mngoma liked Alex so well that when the church proposed to move him yet again to Sibasa in the north, he declined owing to his wife’s asthma – he could not afford, he felt, to live far from medical care. What was more, in Alex he seized the opportunity to regain lost land. Mngoma therefore left church employment. He managed to save enough to buy a small stand – relatively inexpensive in the early years. The entire family worked incessantly to make and bake bricks and build a three-roomed house. Their father had learned the skill, utilising mud and cow dung, during his years as a farm labourer.

After school we’d go to the place and try and help, mixing the mud and sweeping the place where the bricks were to be overturned. Try to get water from – the dam, owned by Italian market gardeners, was not far from us.

Reverend Mngoma, who had been born in rural Dundee in Natal, kept chickens and goats and loved growing vegetables and flowers on his Alex plot. But the Depression years hit the family. And as his daughter observed, as a cleric, Mngoma did not make a good entrepreneur.

He tried one business after another, selling vegetables; he bought some mules and a little cart and he would put all the vegetables he had planted and every weekend he would go out and sell them to the whites around Yeoville, Orange Grove, Killarney and so on. It didn't last long though. He lost the cart and the mules. Then he tried selling medicine in bottles – that also went.

One business after another founded. His wife worked part-time as a washerwoman 'for some people in Houghton, very rich people', but her health failed and eventually Thoko, at the age of 14, was obliged to leave school and go to work in the kitchens in the neighbouring white suburbs.

I cry tears when I see a young little girl not going to school and being forced to go to work because of the parents' problems.

With her meagre wage of £1 and ten shillings, she earned money for food for her family and paid for her younger sisters' schooling. By 1950, Thoko was still in domestic service, unmarried, and a nanny to a two-year-old.

The mother used to go out a lot, especially at night. Nearly every night I used to stay in...I never came home until the end of the month. I used to force myself to come home to give my mother some money. Otherwise, I never went out.

She learned to borrow books unobtrusively from the library of her employers, and so continued her education. Her political education, however, was founded in Alex. Thoko explained:

ANC always held public meetings, every Sunday morning. Whether there was an important issue or not, it made no difference. We had all kinds of speakers, speakers from all sorts of organisations. Local speakers, on issues of importance, like the raising of the bus fares. And whenever there were fresh issues, like influx control, Bantu education and all these things we used to have a speaker for all these things at the square every Sunday morning. So it was easy to organise Alexandra because the people used to watch out for the ANC flag which was put up by someone every Sunday morning and they would just go there and sit down and wait for the meeting to start.

Thoko witnessed the rise of the ANC as a social movement in her neighbourhood, vying with the churches to attract a congregation and with a magnetic calling of their own. Thoko's father became a devotee. But each year during the Second World War added another layer of diverse newcomers. In the spurt of rapid economic expansion, Alex swelled to bulging proportions in the houses and yards. Alex was by no means a monolithic community.

What made me cross was that in 1950 there was a call for a stay-at-home on 1st May, Labour Day. My father, who was the Chairman of the ANC branch of

Alexandra was beaten up by people afterwards. A lot of people died that day – not the Alexander [sic] branch, just people. About eight people were shot by the police here in Alex on that day...One was a cripple. Funny, I don't see her in Alex. She had to have her leg amputated...And after the funeral – it was a mass funeral – some people attacked my father when he came from the meeting one night and they nearly killed him.

They accused him of provoking the police when he broadcast the ANC's call for another stay-away on 26 June, to protest the killings on May Day. 'The people who attacked him were not in an organised group. They waylaid him when he was from a meeting,' and left him in a semi-paralysed state that lasted for months.

I realised that people do not know what is good for them. They don't understand the issues. I thought: just let me get into the whole struggle. I left at the end of that month, May, because my father was in hospital and my mother was scared that something might happen to her. So I came back home and when my father came back from hospital I was ready to join it. I simply enlisted [in the ANC].

City bred, Thoko was in tune with the challenges and the culture of urban life. While assailed by township life, she could communicate effortlessly with other townspeople. Almost immediately, she found a job as a saleswoman in a furniture shop not far from Alex, in Wynberg. Her pay (£3) was more than double that of a domestic worker, though still very low, for employers accorded with the wage regulations for black women. But perhaps even more important for Thoko was that 'I was working right here, I was free in the evenings and the weekends to do what I wanted to do'.

From then onwards, Thoko's life was dedicated to political activity. She became a member of the Federation of South African Women, and met other women as far-a-field as Springs and Germiston. She recalled the importance of organising and recruiting, which involved hard work and meeting and talking to women. There were very few Alex women in the ANC at that time, she recalled:

There was only Mashabalala – she left to live in Winterveld to stay, out of the struggle. Then there was a Mrs Mntosi, the acting chairman's wife while my father was in hospital.

Thoko seems to have been readily accepted by the men because she was her father's daughter. She became active in the ANC's 1952 Defiance Campaign, a civil disobedience campaign protesting against unjust laws which affected both rural and urban communities. In 1954 and 1955 Thoko mobilised members of women's groups, church groups, *stokvels* (savings societies) and ANC branches to put forward their demands for a free society. The outcome was a Congress of the People in Kliptown, Johannesburg, where several thousand national delegates were presented with a draft Freedom Charter on 26 and 27 June 1955. Clear, simple and eloquent, it was a ringing summary of the most

popular demands and was unanimously accepted. The Freedom Charter was ratified by the branches a year later. Thoko also described graphically the build-up to the women's campaign against the proposed Bill to extend passes to women. In 1955 Thoko helped to organise a huge march by women – 'there were 4 000' – to hand themselves in to 'Number Four', the black section of the prison at the Fort in Johannesburg. The previous week had witnessed the violent break up of an anti-pass demonstration of women in Sophiatown. It was now the turn of Alexandra. Thoko chaired a meeting in Freedom Square and called on women not to go to work but to join a protest march. Each woman was to come with a group of women at six in the morning. Surrounded by police – 'there was this kwela-kwela, a whole lot of uniformed policemen, the SB,<sup>9</sup> and a couple of cars, I think, belonging to the press' – the women trickled in, late from their chores at home. Some brought tea and cakes for breakfast. There were only about ten women, then 15, to the amusement of the police.

The police were still there. They were all there, watching and waiting. At half past eight the women didn't come, they simply *poured* from all corners of the square. They were running, pulling their jerseys behind them. You know, I've never seen such a thing! Within a few minutes the whole square was full!...But the members of the committee hadn't arrived with their groups. 'No no let us go, we'll be late!' Getting late for what? Number Four is *never ever* closed. You've got the whole day in which to march.

One of the volunteers brought a truck, and Thoko climbed onto the back and addressed the meeting. They sang 'Nkosi Sikelele, and then the march began. The event was a success. Busloads of women poured into the city centre's Noord Street. They climbed out and marched, singing, thumbs aloft, to the Fort. Before they reached their destination they were arrested for assembling without a permit. Johannesburg's gaols and police cells were filled – Jeppestown, Newlands, Rosebank, Wynberg, Hospital Hill and, of course, Number Four at the Fort. For the women, it was a defining moment. They did indeed sleep over in prison on Monday night. On Tuesday they were charged and, in spite of the urging of the committee members not to accept bails or fines but instead to crowd the prisons, husbands came to look for the women, bailing them out, paying their fines.

Their husbands came for them, one by one – all those women who simply joined us on the day. So they spoiled the whole effect. When we appeared again in court it was Thursday. By this time the bail had been dropped to £1. Our lawyers, Mandela and Tambo, decided to bail us out...The ANC and other organisations, the Congress of Democrats, the TIC and the Coloured People's Organisation, all these got the money together.

The event was a precursor to the national women's march to the Union Buildings the following year, and led also to heightened and more organised local protests such as the extended campaign in Alexandra against permits which, like passes, attempted to



Building a new community in the city, fashioning new ways of surviving in a strange and harsh environment. Johannesburg, 1965

monitor the movements of those deemed to be non-residents.

The campaign was taken to the rural areas and succeeded in mobilising some women, significantly in Sekhukhuneland. Ultimately it was able to postpone but not prevent the extension of the pass laws to women. The more vulnerable, especially, were more easily intimidated by the threat of being ‘endorsed out’ of the city. (Martha, for example, encouraged by her employer at the time, secretly took out a pass and hid it under her bed.)

Thoko’s activism was to continue throughout the fifties and sixties. In 1963 she was arrested for not carrying a pass or permit. Despite her precarious situation, she was able to teach the interpreter a thing or two. Charged with staying in Alex for more than 30 days without a permit, her defence was that she was born there.

Q: How did you manage it?

‘Firstly I became aggressive. Do you know that the women were actually sentenced by the interpreter? You would stand there and he would say what language do you speak? Zulu. He would ask the question in Zulu. “You entered Alexander and stayed there for more than three days without a permit. Have you a permit?”

“No.” He turned to the magistrate and said, “*Skuldig*” [guilty].’

Indignant, Thoko challenged the interpreter in Zulu:

'What! What are you saying?'  
'That you said you had no permit.'  
'And what are you telling the white man?'  
'But you said you were guilty.'  
'You asked me about the permit, not whether I am guilty or not!'

Observing the exchange, while not necessarily understanding it, the magistrate postponed the case for a week but fixed bail for the price of the standard fine for not having a permit. Thoko did not have that amount of money, nor would she allow anyone to pay the bail for her. She spent the week in prison, reflecting and also trying to persuade her fellow prisoners to adopt the principle of no bail and no fine, crowding the prisons instead.

When Thoko returned to court the prosecutor was ready. He had called the black minister of the Methodist church in Brakpan, where Thoko had been christened. In those days, with not enough Methodist ministers, parents had to take their babies to the nearest circuit service on given Sundays. The records showed that Thoko had been christened in Brakpan at the age of 11 months old. The certificate, however, was both a birth and a baptismal certificate and Thoko was able to triumphantly argue that it did not give her date or place of birth, and so could not prove that she was not born in Alexandra. Thoko was acquitted.

And the women! The women who attended the court were now ready to tear this *umfundisi* [minister, teacher or educated person] apart [for allowing himself to be used by the system]. He had to be escorted by the police into his car.

Not long after this trial, though, the Women's Federation was obliged to retract their policy, and reluctantly informed their members that they should accept passes.

It made me feel so sick, really, it was very bad, but I simply had to. The Federation couldn't have stuck it out any longer. It's a pity. We could start all over again. We could do it again.

Like Martha Masina, Thoko never married. Nor did she have children. Thoko elected to be more or less answerable to herself for her decisions and her direction. She was able to help her brothers and sisters and their families, but emotionally she had committed herself to that larger family, Alexandra township, and even beyond; hoping, ambitiously, to contribute towards improving the lot of all black women.

Thoko had observed the perhaps more typical lives of women battling to survive in the city, those who had children to support, with or without men; widows, single mothers, wives or the '*vat-en-sit*' women of traditionally unlegitimised unions, usually 'mixed marriages' from different ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> For them, everyday existence was filled with unremitting working hours, and every ingenious plan of action was taken up with stratagems to employ their own gendered knowledge, such as traditional beer



Women from the informal settlement of Tobruk near Johannesburg, carrying containers of illegally brewed beer. They had been arrested and were made to carry drums of evidence to the police station, 1947.

Newcomers to the city often converted their indigenous knowledge into commodities to supplement the meagre income of the urban household.

brewing (which was an illegal activity in the towns), or gather other resources and earnings for the families in their care.

A relatively lucrative activity, but also a dangerous one because it was illegal, was beer brewing, a gendered skill that rural women brought with them to the city. Traditional beer was eagerly sought after by homesick migrant workers, and thousands of men were willing to part with their hard-earned pennies to come together on a weekend night to socialise and drink familiar or even spiked, intoxicating variations of home brewed liquor.<sup>11</sup>

Many brewers were caught out by the police and were sent to prison or had to pay heavy fines. But they also became more resourceful in evading detection, relying on children to take up watch posts while they were brewing. They also developed contacts with policemen whom they could bribe. These were risks that they braved in order to eke out a small, independent income of their own to augment the family resources. In general, most women kept their savings to pay for school fees for their children's education (Modisane 1963).

These daunting tasks could not have been undertaken without the culture of hospitality and sharing that was their legacy from the homesteads. There was a bitter corollary, however, for the authorities and employers early on grasped the import of this traditional strength and exploited it.

'So far,' observed the Native Affairs Department, 'it has been unnecessary to provide relief for the permanent population but that is due to the practice of natives helping each other' (Callinicos 1993: 36). Employers justified the absence of a living wage, arguing that black workers were essentially peasants, and that their access to the land and to family labour justified the salary of a single person, particularly as migrants were housed in compounds and given a small daily ration of maize meal.

It was the rural homestead economy, with its highly functional gender patterns and kinship systems, which in essence was providing the basis for cheap labour power in the mines and industries under the system of racial segregation. And it relied principally, especially in the context of migrant labour, on black women in the rural areas (women who were pressurised to remain on the diminishing land) and dwindling numbers of able-bodied family members to shore up the traditional economy and pass on the language and traditions to the children.

Added to the heavy tasks of child-rearing and housekeeping which included collecting water, gathering wood, stamping *mielies* (corn), cooking, cleaning and washing, was the ploughing of the land, the hoeing, the sowing, the cultivation and harvesting of crops. With most of the men away there was also the care of the animals to supervise. Chiefs, parents and household heads felt that the labour of women could not be spared and they discouraged women from leaving. Ironically, the unpaid, unremitting labour of the rural women had the effect, as we have seen, of subsidising the low wages of black migrant workers in the towns, and therefore systematically undermining the homestead economy.

But in the postwar economy, survival became increasingly dependent on cash flows from the city. When this was not forthcoming, the younger women left for the urban areas themselves. As the unemployment of men increased, or as their meagre wages were taken up with the cost of living in the towns or the cost of making life in the city bearable, women were forced to become the breadwinners in the city. In town, they developed flexible livelihood strategies as domestic workers, service workers and informal vendors, often commoditising their indigenous knowledge by making and selling traditional food, crafts and clothes, and indigenous healing herbs. These were invaluable experiences for developing livelihood strategies in the hostile world of the so-called 'white' city.

African women from traditional homesteads, therefore, were the last major group to come to town. Women from the 'reserves' tended to arrive in greater numbers from the late forties, as the reserve economies crumbled and the traditional authority figures correspondingly began to lose their influence.

## Drada Mokoape Sebidi and Mmapula Helen Sebidi

One woman who was determined not to allow her family to be destroyed by the system was Drada Mokoape Sebidi.<sup>12</sup> By dint of an unshakable focus on conserving her indigenous culture and values, she eventually succeeded in leaving behind something of her legacy.

During the eighteenth century, her family had lived in the land of Mogale.<sup>13</sup> In a time of territorial contestation, the family had moved many times – they had lived on the slopes of Northcliff and also on a site that stretched from what is now Pretoria Station to Sunnyside – *Tshwane ya Mamelodi*. Finally, around 1880, they settled in a place called Marapiane, to the northeast of Pretoria. It was a superb site, for it adjoined a lake. To protect this precious, life-giving resource, the chief fenced it off, using the modern technology of interlaced wire. On the day that the task began, a baby girl was born to the Mokoape family. She was named ‘Fence’ to mark the historic claiming of the site for the community. Later she came to be known as ‘Drada’ (or ‘Wire’).

In this context of a prolonged quest for land and identity, Drada grew up with a fierce determination to protect her community and their collective strength. She married Ramodiba (significantly meaning ‘deep water’ or lake) Sebidi. She chose, she said years later, the right person; an independent man who knew how to share. Drada seems to have been a remarkable woman, driving herself and her children to work unremittingly, not only for herself but for whoever needed help. She had rigorous standards.

‘She was very strict, very committed, she expected everyone to work,’ recalls her granddaughter, Mmapula. The children learned to herd, to milk the cows and help with the many other tasks in the home. She was a meticulous housekeeper and a skilled gardener, able to produce crops even when there was not much rain.

‘There was lots of food from the land,’ remembered Mmapula – ‘pumpkins, mielies, oranges, watermelons, *mayaka* (sugar cane).’ She recalled one season when she and her friends were given the task of selling their oranges in the neighbouring villages. They came across some workers on a white farm in the area. ‘We were shocked to find that there could be such poor people – wearing sack clothes, and very hungry.’ The children gave them all their oranges.

Drada also built houses and courtyards and supervised others, teaching them how to gather precisely the correct materials and perform the appropriate songs and ceremonies before beginning the task. Working in a team, they stamped and smeared floors, and constructed and decorated walls with murals. Her prodigious energy attracted many people to her home. She had become an exemplar, respected for her hard work, concern for all and her unstinting work with others. She had many visitors, some of whom came to her for help. ‘These people were invited by God to come to me,’ she would tell her family. ‘They have come here for a purpose,’ she said, serving their hunger before asking them why they had come.

Despite their mother's example, the children disliked her open house. They also tired of their mother's use of the whip to discipline any lapse from constant work. Before they could even think of cleaning the house, for example, the children had to wake long before sunrise to hoe and dig in the fields. Only after three or four hours' hard work could they begin the morning's work at home.

To Drada's disappointment, her daughter and sons left home, joining the cohort of migrant existence to earn money in the city. Mmapula recalls her grandmother's attempts to understand the new economy: 'When they came back, [Drada] would ask them, "Where is the money now?" [They answered] "No it is going to be money one day and we will have it." But when they went back to the city they would take so much food with them. "The white people have swallowed our children," Drada lamented.'

In the late 1930s, her daughter Thlakane left to become a domestic worker in Johannesburg, leaving her baby girl, Mmapula, in the care of her mother. Drada insisted on keeping the child. Mmapula became very attached to her grandmother. 'You are my gift from God so that I can share my work with you,' Drada told the little girl. She taught the child from a very young age, driving her hard.

'I was just a child, but she made me keen to work even harder [to please her],' recalled Mmapula. 'Our parents brought nothing from the city; we survived from our own work. They brought furniture [which they did not use], and for us they brought dried bread from the places where they were living and dry [leftover] meat from their suppers.'

She loved to help her grandmother with the decoration of houses – in a culture of work parties, where the community helped each other to clear the land, hoe, collect dung and build earth homesteads, the children had many opportunities to learn traditional skills and enjoy the results afterwards when the work was done. A community life with few amenities, yet not bowed down by poverty, encouraged creativity. On Sunday nights, after the many rounds of churchgoing, grandparents, parents or children would invite the village and give concerts. They would perform storytelling, music, songs and dances. Culture, tradition and history were effortlessly passed on from one generation to another.

The spirit of reciprocity did not take the form of cash payment, but rather the customary practice of collective productivity. If anyone was in ill health or troubled, traditional healers would assist. 'Healers would send you to find certain herbs and dig them up; they would cook them and you would get better,' recalled Mmapula. Payment was optional – a chicken or even a cow if the patient could afford it – for, after all, 'the gift of healing was God-given' and the giver was confident of a reward in time to come. And so, said Mmapula, the way of Marapiane was 'giving and paying back and giving again'.

But not all activities were given over to the community. Drada also cultivated her granddaughter's individual abilities. 'My grandmother created a courtyard in which I could play with all the designs,' recalled Mmapula. She was friendly with some



Ndebele children in the neighbouring villages in the area and said, ‘My eyes would copy their designs’. She began to practise these designs at home. When Drada saw them, she said, ‘This is not our work. Our way is to show the mud shining there.’ And she demonstrated how it was done, using special cow dung that was the secret of her craft. Drada saw that Mmapula was revealing a love of art, and encouraged her to play and work in her own space. That courtyard

affirmed the child’s self-worth and in years to come was to be her gift of freedom. Rising above hardships and distractions in the city, she followed her muse.

Mmapula’s mother, Thlakane Swella, was also creative. On the rare occasions that she came home, she taught her daughter dressmaking, knitting and embroidery. The child would make small garments and give them as gifts to newborn babies – and so, she recalled, her upbringing was largely influenced by a world of resourceful women. Yet underlying their day-to-day activities was an awareness of the power and the support of the ancestors. Mmapula’s grandfather had passed away before she was born. ‘With his spirit through my grandmother and also his brother [together with] all the grandfathers [they] also helped us.’

In 1959, Thlakane sent for her. Mmapula was 22 years old. As she took her leave, her grandmother’s advice was, ‘Love yourself. Never do things we don’t know, otherwise you will be stolen.’

Mmapula found work in Johannesburg as a domestic worker. She was well prepared for housework – cleaning floors, clothes and cooking, although she also had to learn new techniques. But the life was lonely and the servants’ quarters set well apart from the main house. Unprepared for the commoditisation of everyday life, the young woman expected that to live with and work for a family was to be part of that family; that the woman whose home she was to clean and whose children she was to nurture would be another mother for her. Mmapula was taken aback when her separate backyard ‘hut’ was of a very different order from the large main house, which was equipped with electricity, hot running water and electrical appliances. Building her own home and courtyard was not an option, she immediately discovered. She soon encountered cultural and class differences and racial attitudes. Her new name was now Helen, her baptismal name from the Lutheran church, and required a renegotiation of her identity. Her employers often disapproved of Mmapula’s confident manner and easy style of addressing anyone, white or black, including guests of the employer, or moving around the house as if it were her own. Mmapula changed jobs several times.

There were times when she was out of a job and in essence homeless in the city. ‘No home, hiding from the police, living like wild people.’ She slept wherever she could find hospitality. If she spent the night with other domestic workers, she would need to creep out very early in the morning before the employer might become of aware of her presence.

In the mid-1960s, the government managed, finally, to impose passes on women. The pass laws, she observed, warped relationships. When she was employed, the employer worked her very hard. The pass, the madam assumed, meant, ‘You only belong to me.’ And so too did the accommodation that she provided. It was not to be shared with anyone else.

Mmapula recalled times, in between jobs, when she would walk long distances looking for a place to sleep, never finding anyone who would dare to help her, and ultimately sleeping in a public toilet.

Even her fellow workers, she found, had been warped by the city values of caution rather than trust. Domestic work, symbolised by women’s covered heads, starched caps and layered, aproned uniforms, confined as it was by narrow backyard living, imparted the image of domestic workers as ‘respectables’. Most were reluctant to jeopardise their jobs over risky solidarity with the high turnover of temporary colleagues coming from diverse parts of the country, instead prioritising the well-being of their own homestead back home. But Mmapula doggedly resisted this invasion of her identity. ‘To them I seemed arrogant, proud,’ said Mmapula. ‘I had my own rural identity. It wasn’t very nice in town.’

Twice she clashed with the law. The first time she was walking in Orange Grove when she was chased by young hoodlums. She ran into a house, opened the gate and knocked for help at the door of the servant’s quarters. The owners of the house reported that they had found her stealing food from the refrigerator. She was arrested and, lacking legal representation, imprisoned for two months in Number Four – how easy it was to fall foul of the law if you were black! ‘When I came back from jail I said to my mother, “I am going back to the rural.” I was unhappy in town. She said to me, “This is how we live. You are not going anywhere. You have to look for a job.” ’

On another occasion, she was working for a caretaker in a block of flats. Like her grandmother, Mmapula disapproved of shebeens. Despite the practice of many women in the towns who employed their traditional skills of brewing in order to survive, she observed what amounted to a crass commercialisation of a beer spiked with bizarre concoctions. At home *umqombothi* (traditional beer) was used as a collective celebration of communal work. In town, she saw drunkenness leading to violence and the abuse of women. So, in this era of prohibition, when the caretaker asked her to report to her if she saw the ‘Zulu’ cleaners selling liquor, the police arrived and arrested them. The cleaners retaliated and accused Mmapula of subversion – of speaking badly of whites. Mmapula was arrested and locked up in Norwood Police Station. But the other domestic workers in the building waited until a black policeman was on duty and explained the misunderstanding to him. Mmapula was released.

Fortunately Mmapula also experienced a counter to these traumatic experiences. She found employment with a supportive immigrant German couple, Hermann and Heidi Peach, who were excited to discover Mmapula's creative pastime. Heidi was herself interested in the creative arts and began to develop her own craftwork such as tie-dye, painting furniture and so on. Encouraged, Mmapula began to get in touch with other artists, although she found their work influenced by urban and western forms, unlike her own. She found an art master in Soweto, Kwenakini Monyane, who had taught Gerard Sekhoto (when that artist had lived in Sophiatown in the early forties), George Pemba, Credo Mutwa and Miriam Maseko. Given more spare time than she had ever had before, Mmapula's work flourished.

She returned home to see her grandmother whenever she had the opportunity. Drada was as independent as ever, refusing to claim the tiny pension offered to black women by the government. Mmapula also observed that Marapiane was becoming crowded. As the apartheid plan began to be implemented, more and more neighbouring farm workers were being evicted. By the 1960s, apartheid implementation was reaching a high point and the pass system was processing pass offenders through the magistrates' courts into farm prisons, providing white farmers with convict labour. Large numbers of evicted sharecroppers and farm labourers were coming to Marapiane, now relegated as a 'bantustan'. To add to their problems, the laws on stock limitation (one of the Defiance Campaign's 'Six Unjust Laws') further impoverished Marapiane. Mmapula needed to continue to work in the city.

One night, after the death of one of her grandmother's friends, Mmapula had a disturbing dream. 'I have come to fetch Drada,' said the old woman. 'I am lonely.' Mmapula left for Marapiane. She found her grandmother ill. She had not eaten for four days – a pot of *pap* (maize porridge) was on the hearth, cooked by a blind old woman a week earlier. Drada was going to die.

Mmapula cooked some food, made her grandmother comfortable and cleaned the home inside and out. She went to thank the blind woman and saw that her clothes were in danger of catching alight as she stirred her pot. From then onwards, Mmapula began to cook for the elders whenever she went to the village.

A few months earlier, the Peach family decided to return to Germany, appalled by the unfolding events in apartheid South Africa. Before they left, Mmapula brought them home to meet her grandmother. Drada scolded her granddaughter for keeping this other family to herself. Mmapula found another position and stayed on in Johannesburg for about a year afterwards. Then she found that she was pregnant. There was no question of relying on the father; in any case, she was not ready for marriage. 'Johannesburg men did not love themselves,' she explained. 'They wore suits; they were working for the bosses. Also, I could not marry before my life is seen.'

Mmapula decided to return home to Marapiane, where she could care for both the very young and the very old. As her art teacher Monyane told her, her life there would reveal her direction and develop her art. While nursing her child, Mmapula would

invite her grandmother's friends to parties, cook *vetkoek* (fried cakes, similar to doughnuts), help to cut and dress their hair, and cut their nails. 'I was running a nursing home, [but] my grandmother had the joy of getting to share time with friends.'

To survive in the village, Mmapula resumed her old routine. She hoed, planted and earned a little money making dresses and selling vegetables and food to schools. She found that her grandmother was much loved, and people in the village were eager to help. The headmaster asked her to accompany the children around the area whenever there was a singing contest and provide the catering. The storekeeper was happy to give her supplies on indefinite credit. 'That is community life,' said Mmapula. 'People help each other without thinking of a reward. God will find a way to pay you later.'

Mmapula stayed on in the village for ten years, using her creative skills to provide sustenance and share her resources with the community. Her grandmother also encouraged her to develop her talent. She would scold Mmapula if she felt that she was shirking or wasting time: 'You must get back to your work! God has given you a talent. It is a sin to throw it away.'

Drada died at the age of 105. Mmapula returned to the city, for urban opportunities beckoned. She was strengthened, she felt, through reaffirming her identity and rural values.

• • •

We now return to Martha's story. Prison farm labour also affected the Masina family. As the years went by, the Masinas went from one farm to another, their fortunes ever more insecure, increasingly desperate for land.

Sometimes they chase you. '*Jy maak jouself baas hierso*' ['You are making yourself the boss'<sup>14</sup>]. If it's raining, you sleep in the road. We couldn't go back to Swaziland. Who is going to know us [after all these years]?

Eventually old man Masina came to a farm in Oogies, near Witbank. Miserable as black wages were in the urban areas, these were higher than those under the semi-slave conditions on the farms. White farmers found themselves tiresomely short of labour, and their demand for child labour became rougher and more urgent. With his children now all grown, Masina turned to his grandchildren. Letty had two sons, who lived with their grandparents while their mother worked as a domestic in Johannesburg. In the early 1950s, the second child, Samuel, was 16 years old.

The farmer took the boy along with other children to work on a farm in Groblersdal, outside the district of Marble Hall, a few hundred kilometres from Oogies. Lacking sleeping quarters for these child workers, the farmer put them in an old pigsty. The children worked long and arduous hours with nothing to eat but maize meal, which they cooked themselves before dawn – this despite the cabbages and other vegetables that were grown on the farm. At night they had to make a fire again and cook some

maize meal for themselves. They were not paid, nor were they provided with clothes or even soap to wash themselves.

One evening, Mrs Masina was startled by a noise outside her house. ‘Open the door, *Gogo*, open the door! It’s Samuel,’ she heard an urgent voice. The boy was close to collapse and frightened that his grandfather would be angry. He had been walking for three days and three nights, hiding in the bushes to avoid being spotted by passing traffic and sleeping out in the open, without a blanket, at the mercy of wild animals. The next morning the boy was taken to the Indian doctor in Oogies and treated for exhaustion. Letty confronted her father: ‘Send your sons to go and work, not mine!’ The value of her wages was pitted against the unconditional respect due to a father. She was emboldened to challenge the old way of survival by appeasement.

The outcome was that Masina held a meeting with the parents of the other children who had been taken to Groblersdal. They all agreed to ask the white farmer to inspect the working and living conditions on the farm. But the ‘master’s’ response was to evict Masina and all the others who had withdrawn their children’s labour. ‘After that my father and my brother moved to Blackhill, near Witbank. We stayed there.’ Masina relied on the remittances of his children to pay the rent – £12 a year; each working child contributed £4 – for the right to remain to cultivate a small plot of land.

Masina eventually died on a farm in Olifantsfontein. After that, his widow moved to a farm in Winterveld, where she was let five morgen of land for £5 a month, provided by her children as before. There, Mrs Masina and her grandchildren would ‘*skoffel*’ (dig) the fields to raise a few crops to feed the family. There was no water. They were obliged to buy it – a ten-gallon tin of water cost ten cents. Samuel, Letty’s son managed to build a one-roomed ‘zinc’ house for them, the materials donated by Martha’s employer’s son, ‘Master Murray’. But it was clearly far too small. Adding to their discomfort, the local school, adhering to apartheid’s ‘homeland’ principles, would not accept the children:

...because they’re Tswanas, we’re Swazis...We [were] not registered there. They can come at any time and move us out. We got no place – it’s just like the *boere-mense*; we are not their people.

Her employer, Verna Hunt, then drove Martha to Mabopane. There they were offered assistance: ‘There was an African man; he crooked me of a *lot* of money. He said, “I will help you, I’m working at the office.” I give him sometimes R50.’ The process dragged on, until eventually the official informed her that she needed to change her passport to become a Motswana. But Martha was unwilling to change her identity. She tried again: ‘I went to Pretoria to the office of Phatudi and said can I have a place? I asked [for] Mosteloos, near Groblersdal.’

Martha was fleeced in Mabopane too, paying bribes ‘to make it soft – R40, R30, and Letty’s son-in-law gave them R90. One day that man (who took the money) was in hospital because the people hit him for what he’s doing.’

Despite these negative experiences – perhaps because it was the district of her childhood – this time Martha was prepared to compromise. She took out a Lebowa passport, and with Verna's help, moved all the family possessions from Winterveld to a piece of land which she bought for R36 at Mosteloos. At length, again assisted by Verna's children, she built a small brick house there. It is where she expects to be buried. At the end of her long life, and after generations of dispossession and homelessness, Martha came closest to having a modest place of her own. 'Now my life is better. When I'm tired I can go home.'

Martha Mpelilape Masina never became fully integrated into urban life. Afraid of the 'locations' and street-smart urban culture, she remained essentially a migrant worker, dependent on her employers for food and accommodation, living at their disposal. Until her last position with Verna Hunt, she continued to move from employer to employer, as her family had done in her childhood. She had never been able to enjoy a sense of stable community. Dispossessed of any place she and her family could call home, she had had to renegotiate her identity. She remained Christian into her old age, but merged her faith with a belief in the *idhlozi*, the ancestors, who would come to her in her dreams, especially during hard times. It was an ancestor who in her dreams advised Martha never to lose heart, for one day she would find a place of her own.

• • •

Thokozile Virginia Mngoma continued her activism after the banning of her movement, the ANC. She became a cell member underground. In 1963, heralded by an early-morning knock on the door, she was arrested for 'non-possession of a pass and no permit'. She refused to pay the fine, and spent her time talking to the women in prison.

A woman would be arrested today [for not producing a pass] and she pays £7.10 [admission of guilt] and the following week she's arrested again. Those who were deported would entrain [leave on the train] that same evening with the children and all – they'd be fetched from school at 2 o'clock, 7 o'clock – if she's lucky – her husband would come; otherwise they don't even see the husband. They go into the train, escorted by a policewoman and go to the commissioner at their homes. Two days later they come back, only to be arrested the following week.

Thoko went on to explain the importance to the women of getting back to their partners. 'As soon as you turn your back you'll never get all the money you're supposed to get. [They'll find] some other woman. So it's always better to be with your husband you see [chuckles].'

Then, to her great regret, the Women's Federation resolved at a meeting that all women should take passes. 'The federation couldn't have stuck it out any longer. I was strongly against it. It made me feel so sick, really; it was very bad, but I simply had to.' In May 1969 she was detained for four months and held in solitary confinement.

Afterwards she was charged, along with Winnie Mandela and Joyce Sikhakhane, in the ‘Trial of the Twenty Two’. Acquitted in 1970, Thoko was slapped with a banning order for five years. Fortunately for her, she was living with a partner and she had company. ‘If a third person came in one of us would have to leave the room.’

After her ban expired, her house became a central place for social gatherings and, although she could not reveal it, political mobilisation. She asked her interviewer not to visit on weekends.

Too many friends, all different kinds [including white people]. They’re not all our types, some are churchgoers and some are drinkers and some don’t want to see a white. And the house is always full of all sizes from the youngest person to the oldest woman.

At the time (September 1983) tensions were building up in Alex that bore no comparison with those divisions in the 1950s that had nearly killed her father, the *umfindisi* Mngoma. The township landscape had changed drastically since then. The population had grown exponentially – despite ongoing draconian ‘influx control’ measures – giving the ghetto-like space even more scope for contestation. For one thing, there were the massive single-sex hostels built in the sixties and seventies for rural-based migrant workers – spaces where thousands of alienated ‘sojourners’ could be housed cheaply and monitored.

Alex was the backdrop around which so many struggles had taken place – the bus boycotts in the 1940s, 1950s and 1970s – the various ANC and PAC campaigns of the fifties as well as the wake of 1976, when children had used dustbin lids to shield themselves in running battles with the police, with stones as weapons; they were already ‘comrades’ in their own right. Backyards were now bulging with tenants and new generations of extended families.

There was also a large population of youth. The gang culture of youths continued. At times it was absorbed in different ways in the new political formations of resistance that were emerging (Bozzoli 2004).<sup>15</sup> By 1983, the labour movement was a major force for change, and trade unionists like Moses Mayekiso, who lived in Alex, were beginning to look for support from the community’s civic associations for labour struggles, stayaways and strikes.

Thoko, as an ANC Women’s Federation veteran (and at the time of her interviews with Gordon [1985]), was deeply involved in mobilising for the new umbrella organisation, the United Democratic Front (UDF), which had been launched in July of that year. In the absence of a documented history, young people turned to her, a veteran, for her memories. She talked of the Freedom Charter and its non-racial, inclusive and participatory demands. She also included the role that women had played in the struggle, both in their unsung contributions as practical supporters and as known activists. Women were indeed active, if not in the leadership, then as grassroots members of the civic associations as well as in the labour and national liberation movements. These different

strands of resistance, in the various stages of formation and coherence, did not always pull together, particularly in the early period of the UDF.

Thoko's sometimes romantic memories of the community of the past underwent a critique of those who (she felt) sought to advance their own individual ambitions. Thoko talked about some women (possibly in the labour movement, which had direct international links) who 'like to sit in offices or address ready-made conferences and travel overseas. Just to go and show off how big they are. They just can't do hard work, they don't know how it is done, the digging, the digging'. They were, she implied, also benefiting from the culture of the underground, and the hard sacrifices that their cadres were making.

Later most but not all of the resistance groupings became affiliates of the UDF, for Alex also had a tradition of political differences. As the UDF began to set up its alternative structures to resist state control, they turned to old traditions, drawing on a collective, indigenous culture which had proved to be their major strength in resisting state aggression in the past. 'People's courts' or traditional *lekgotla* were set up as a defiant and potent alternative to the unjust apartheid laws. The *lekgotla* sought to rehabilitate (rather than punish) abusive behaviour and/or collaboration with the system that years of violation and humiliation and cheap labour had wrought. In seeking to reform the community, the court cases had a gender component; complainants included wives and mothers who were abused or abandoned. Decisions, while firmly discouraging antisocial behaviour, were made by traditional consensus, so that all could 'own' the outcome and therefore be more likely to co-operate in the campaigns that followed.

Thoko had participated in formulating the strategy that was to characterise the tactics and methods of the UDF in their campaigns in the years to come. As the struggle intensified, funerals resulted in more and more funerals. Women featured prominently at the funerals, as collective caterers and organisers, and above all as the bereaved – mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. In Thoko's last interview with Gordon, she remarked, 'There's a funeral in 16th Avenue that I must attend this weekend and I know there's a lot of people, we will be full in the house here' (1985).

In her old age, with slim resources, Thoko was grateful for the home that she had helped to build as a small child.

You see – well, I'm black – I believe it's important that you have the graves of your family near you. If you don't have good dreams you've got to go and talk to your ancestors, and ask them why...I don't have the money to go to Natal to talk to them.

Fortunately the graves of her parents were nearby: 'If I need help, need to appeal to them, I just walk to the grave.'

Thokozile Mngoma died at home in Alex in 1995, the year after South Africa's first democratic elections (Shope 2002).

• • •



Mmapula with one of her large paintings, 1987.

As for Mmapula, back in the city her hardships continued. Nevertheless, her life gradually became qualitatively different. Monyane introduced her to 'Artists in the Sun', a consortium of artists who displayed their work at Zoo Lake in Johannesburg on Sundays. There were times when she had no money at all, but she continued to sell her work at Zoo Lake.

Then Mmapula had another important dream, which she was able to interpret only later. She dreamed that she was home at Marapiane, dressed in traditional clothes, gazing at the sunrise. Two aeroplanes suddenly appeared, aggressively diving into the homesteads and flattening them. Shocked, she then caught sight of some uncleared calabashes in the rubble. She picked them up, trying to restore order to the demolished homestead.

A few months later, Mmapula was displaying her work at Zoo Lake when she caught sight of a friend of her former German employers. There was a happy reunion. Mmapula learned that the friend planned a trip to Germany and was going to see the Peach family. Mmapula wanted to send them a gift and arranged to meet the friend again. But she had very little money even for materials to make something. In the following few days she went home. She collected some calabashes, dried them, cleaned them and decorated them with carvings and beads. She sent these to her German friends.

'I received lots of orders,' she recalled, as a result. 'These calabashes protected my life while I was painting. I started telling stories with the knobs that I was putting on the calabashes.' The orders were so great that Mmapula arranged for friends at home to collect wheelbarrow loads of calabashes. 'People helped me to decorate them, and got some money.'



Mmapula displays her work at 'Artists in the Sun' at the Zoo Lake in Johannesburg in the early 1980s.

remarks Isabel Hofmeyr, 'that reflects on the ways in which we imagine the passing of time through the aid of narrative' (Hofmeyr 1993: xi). And often, that most vivid of narratives, autobiography, is illustrative of both an era and a unique set of experiences. Life stories are of limited value if they are to be straightjacketed into 'typical' scenarios.

• • •

Though the three women all had rural family backgrounds, each came from a different set of experiences – the most thoroughly dispossessed, the urbanised, the indigenous. By focusing on particular individuals within the wider community, the biographies in this chapter have demonstrated ways in which even so-called 'ordinary' women responded creatively and strategically to the great challenges of survival and assertion in a time of dislocation and economic upheaval. Martha and Mmapula were first-generation newcomers to the city. Their formative years shaped their identity. Their indigenous knowledge, passed on to them by their mothers and grandmothers (and in Thoko's case by her father), their practical skills, their gender and their stance in life – informed by the family, oral culture, hard work for the homestead and collective values – often provided the material and emotional support system that enabled them to survive. Thoko, who was born in the melting pot of the city and developed a hybrid modus of living, a life between village and township, had absorbed the syncretic values of community concern and the 'brotherly' love preached by the Christian church, applying these to her cause.

Yet while they share a common oppression, each has her own unique story to tell. Each conveys a sense of agency in her narrative. One recalls the very young daughters of Masina the sharecropper, in their most vulnerable moments, refusing to return to the humiliating conditions of work in the farmhouse; Letty preferring to be relentlessly whipped rather than compromise her dignity; and in later years, intervening to protect her son in a similar situation. And Mpelilape, too, made a momentous decision to leave home and join her cohort of friends, redefining her economic role. Thoko's rather late decision to

Both at home and abroad, Mmapula attracted the attention of patrons and curators. Despite the depredations of city life, she had held on to the identity that her grandmother nurtured, and found a way to express it. In time, Helen Sebidi became a well-known and highly respected artist.

As in life's daily experience, memory is never ended. But testimony confirms the biblical psalm that 'we spend our years as a tale that is told' – a sentence,

leave ‘the kitchens’ and follow her father’s dream in the ANC bestowed on her the confidence to cast her life’s direction; while Mmapula took the remarkable leap from a pre-capitalist rural upbringing to successfully market her art, with the aid of her ancestors.

It is this quality of agency that biography confers on individuals. By following their particular story, it restores a sense of dignity and a certain measure of the range of options, however constricted, in the larger narrative of life in a hostile or alien world. Biography becomes a prism through which to view history – structures and historical processes are revealed without losing the texture of the day-to-day encounter with life in a particular era.

One should also bear in mind, however, that the testimonies of the women, while making eloquent meaning of their lives, were tailored to their imagined white audience – for the interviewers, however well meaning, had the privilege of class, race, education and access to the published word. The women’s stories, so generously shared, were inevitably selective. So much of their storytelling must have been consciously edited, not unlike the familiar course of communication developed in their conversations with white employers; for to explain certain intimacies, cultural norms and nuances was in all likelihood too complicated to express to outsiders. They might well have been misunderstood. Yet there was the desire to convey, in the heightened moment of struggle against the divisiveness of apartheid, the experiences and hardships to a mostly white readership largely ignorant of the lives of black labouring men and women – including those of the domestic workers who served, slept and lived out their daily lives in the homes and outhouses of their employers.

To begin with, husbands are notably missing from our brief life stories. Martha, Thoko and Mmapula never married – but then, like migrant labour, domestic service lent itself to destroying long-term relationships. Not that domestic work itself was atypical – it was the largest employer of black men and women after the mining industry in the 1940s. Even into the twenty-first century, it continues to employ one-third of working women.

Thoko, through her activism in a woman’s movement, was very aware of the constrictions of marriage and she was content to develop informal relationships with male partners. Mmapula, too, had acquired through Drada an image of the ideal partner, a perhaps pre-colonial vision of a different kind of ‘complementary’ relationship between men and women (Nzwegu 2001). She never found him.

Notable, however, is that in their testimonies, their most vivid self-representations revolve around the challenges of being black and poor in a rapidly changing and racially discriminating world. Their experiences seem to illustrate their black, more than their gendered, identities. The patriarchy of their fathers and contemporaries was clearly deeply undermined by systematic oppression. The vulnerability of both sexes had much in common.

Perhaps more unusual, children are scarcely present in the narratives of the three women. Mmapula’s elder son, conceived when she was visiting her mother in the city,

scarcely a child herself, died in his adolescence, away from his mother, in Marapiane – Drada, in her old age and with her family depleted, had been unable to protect her great grandchild. Later, another child was born to Mmapula and raised by her mother. This is yet another tale to be told, reflecting the fragility of young lives when material and social resources are deeply undermined. Martha, as we know, lost her only live-born child. Neither Martha nor Mmapula spoke very much about their pain – these were stories that were suppressed, and emerged only late in their testimonies.

Like the women who struggled to raise families in the informal sector, they too exercised their limited – if different – range of options. As best they could, they drew on the resources of their employers, and sometimes their goodwill. The cost to them was their profound dependence on their employers, whom they could confront and challenge only with difficulty.

The oppressive confines of their lives demanded acquiescence, subtle, small acts of almost imperceptible defiance, of tiny spaces won by stealth, or painfully developed tactics and strategies, some of which proved to be spectacularly effective, even as they failed (like the iconic women's anti-pass campaign) to change the system or their lives.

Yet cutting through these unequal power relationships, tentative and uneven communication began sometimes to emerge. The women's deeply embedded value system of ubuntu, which respected the humanity of all people, even oppressors, gave them an inner strength and sometimes an ability to touch their employers, even those whose sensibilities were dulled by centuries of inherited colonial and apartheid attitudes.

Each of the women worked and gave most of her earnings to family and community. Of the three, Martha returned to a greatly changed rural life; but she had managed, with the help of her employers, to achieve a small piece of land, with security of tenure. As in her childhood, she had to adapt yet again to new neighbours and a new landscape. Despite her childlessness, she assumed the role of a traditional 'grandmother' and her socially mobile nieces and nephews, whom she had helped to educate, and their children considered her home in the village as theirs.

Thoko, born in the city, was able to move out of domestic service and into the retail industry, where she remained with the same firm until she retired, continuing her real work in the liberation movement. Exposed to a highly political and labour activist community, she was the most gender, race and class conscious of the three. She was able to negotiate her gender role by working with other women, and make it work for her and for her movement.

Mmapula, of a later apartheid generation, negotiated her existence between town and countryside, claiming some respite from the impositions of domestic work. She was able to achieve that rare outcome in her time, the conversion of her ex-employers into friends and equals.

The three testimonies reveal, too, the ambiguities and the alternating identities and contradictions that inevitably accompany the memories of the women. Martha and Mmapula brought with them not only conservative values and a deep distrust of the

white oppressors who ruled the country, but also a wariness of the black diversity they encountered in the city. Stereotypes and ethnic chauvinism threatened to cut them off from urban black communities. As all three women discovered, a common oppression was no guarantee of unity in the complex city (even in the shared, demarcated space of Alexandra), or of the absence of exploitation by black opportunists. Yet Drada's boycott of state handouts demonstrates that conservatism can be radical. Her stubbornness ultimately served as a motivation for Mmapula to assert her indigenous creativity, and succeed in communicating it successfully to the outside world.

Each woman had witnessed momentous changes in her society, both rural and urban. They tried to make meaning of these changes. They sometimes nostalgically romanticised the past, especially as they witnessed over time the tangible deterioration, even havoc, wrought by the application of apartheid policies and the escalating resistance to them.

Fifty years after imagination and audacity impelled many thousands of black women collectively to risk their safety to protest against passes to the highest apartheid authority, the testimonies of Masina, Mngoma and Sebidi offer the reader a flavour of what it was like to be a black woman in those grasping years of white South Africa's racial industrial era. Their experiences remind us of the enduring significance of personal struggles by 'ordinary people' against the immense historical forces facing South Africa in those years. Each of their memories reaches out to the present generation. They are messages from the past.

## NOTES

- 1 The first two biographies related in this chapter draw from powerful testimonies given to the late Suzanne Gordon, who in the 1970s and 1980s researched the lives and working conditions of domestic workers in Johannesburg (Gordon 1985). In 1982 Sue generously gave me the transcripts of 23 unpublished interviews that she had undertaken. All were potent testimonies. These, including the life stories of Martha Masina and Thoko Virginia Mngoma, are tales told in the 1980s, during the dying, violent spasms of apartheid.
- 2 For biographies of South African black women published in the 1970s and 1980s, see Tlali (1975), Marks (1987), Khuzwayo (1985), Callinicos (1987) and Bozzoli with Nkotsoe (1991).
- 3 Martha Mpelilape Masina in a series of unpublished interviews by Suzanne Gordon in Johannesburg from 14 March to 3 August 1983, and two further interviews by Luli Callinicos, Johannesburg, 9 and 15 February 1992. Extracts of Gordon's interviews are discussed in Gordon (1985) and in Callinicos (1993).
- 4 See for example Sol Plaatje's (1916) story of the Kgobadi family, cast out with their belongings, losing their baby in their search for a place to live and having to bury it on the side of the road.
- 5 I was tempted, for the purposes of this chapter, to use the word ubuntu, so familiar to Masina, Mngoma and Sebidi. However, I decided not to open up a debate that I cannot explore in this chapter. My reading of ubuntu is contained in its aspects of social relationships and communal identity, and for me is best illustrated by the African maxim, '*Moto ke moto ka Batho* (A person is a person through other people)'. However, in my discussion with the editor, I have been made aware that ubuntu is more complex than this homily, however universal and enduring it might be. Some of the discourse around the values embedded within it indicates the need to unpack and examine issues on the collective and the individual. The relationship between these philosophical questions and their relationship to broader feminist discourse in the private and public space would be stimulating and fruitful to explore. Conferences and discussions are currently under way by academics and organic intellectuals who are keen to take the concepts further.
- 6 Interview by Luli Callinicos, Johannesburg 9 February 1992.

- 7 This biography is drawn from the original transcription of a series of interviews of Thokozile Mngoma by the late Suzanne Gordon in May 1983. See also Gordon (1985).
- 8 Besides Thoko's fond recollection of Alex as a seamless community, see also Mandela (1994) and Tlali (1975).
- 9 SB, the 'Special Branch' of the police force.
- 10 See Modikwe Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance*.
- 11 See Mokgatle (1971), la Hausse (1988) and Callinicos (1987).
- 12 Testimony based on a series of conversations between Luli Callinicos and Helen Mmapula Sebidi, May 2005 to Feb 2006, and presented here with Sebidi's permission.
- 13 After whom the town of Magaliesberg is named.
- 14 In other words, you are the servant and cannot dictate your conditions of work.
- 15 For a fascinating discussion of how the disruptive, at times brutal and violent methods of the 'com-tsotsis' were subsequently marginalised in the official memory of the history of Alex, see Bozzoli (2004). But this was to emerge in subsequent developments in the township.

## REFERENCES

- Bozzoli B (2004) *Theatre of struggle and the end of apartheid*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Bozzoli B with Nkotsoe M (1991) *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, life strategy, and migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Bozzoli B (n.d.) *Memory and forgetting: the Alexandra Rebellion of 1986*. Available at: [www.feltrinelli.it/Fondazione/donwload/Bozzolirel.pdf](http://www.feltrinelli.it/Fondazione/donwload/Bozzolirel.pdf).
- Callinicos L (1987) *Working life: Factories, townships and popular culture*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Callinicos L (1993) *A place in the city*. Johannesburg: Ravan/Maskew Miller Longman.
- Dikobe M (1973) *The Marabi dance*. London: Heinemann.
- Gordon S (1985) *A talent for tomorrow: Life stories of South African servants*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Hofmeyr I (1993) 'We spend our years as a tale that is told': Oral historical narrative in a South African chiefdom. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Khuzwayo E (1985) *Call me woman*. Randburg: Ravan Press.
- La Hausse P (1988) *Brewers, beerhalls and boycotts*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Lessing D (2005) 'Writing autobiography' from time bites. London: Harper Perennial.
- Mandela N (1994) *Long walk to freedom*. London: Little Brown.
- Marks S (1987) *Not either an experimental doll: The separate worlds of three South African women*. London: Killie Campbell Africana Library and UNP.
- Modisane B (1963) *Blame me on history*. Lonson: Thames & Hudson.
- Mokgatle N (1971) *The autobiography of an unknown South African*. Berkeley: Los Angeles.
- Nzwegwu F (2001) *Love, motherhood and the African heritage: The legacy of Flora Nwapa*. Dakar: African Renaissance.
- Plaatje S (1916) *Native life in South Africa*. London: PS King & Son.
- Shope GN (ed) (2002) *Malibongwe: Celebrating our unsung heroines*. Jet Park: Teamwork Printers.
- Tlali M (1975) *Muriel at the metropolitan*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

# Generations of struggle:

## Trade unions and the roots of feminism, 1930–60

IRIS BERGER

The trade unions have got to follow the workers in all their travels – to get them home, and to school, in the education and welfare of their children, everywhere. The whole life of a worker needs trade union involvement. And together with that goes the whole question of equality between men and women. (Mashinini 1989: 119)

As a wave of working-class militancy swept through South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, the arrest, banning and exile of prominent union leaders during the previous decades had severed the links among generations of activists. Thus, when Tembi Nabe (an organiser and ex-vice president of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union) shocked some members of the audience at a 1983 labour education workshop by speaking frankly of women's subordination within the household, she never suspected her kinship with Mary Fitzgerald, a flamboyant leader who raised similar issues in the early 1900s. But Nabe's graphic descriptions of women workers providing idle husbands with an endless round of domestic and sexual services closely matched Fitzgerald's critique of domestic servitude. Similarly, when the shop stewards at a Dunlop chemical factory successfully laid a trap for a training officer who was demanding sexual favours from employees, they had no idea of their historical bond with garment strikers who, in 1931, complained of pressure to go out with the foreman or the boss in order to keep their jobs.

In her address to the Federation of South African Trade Unions workshop, Nabe graphically described the household life of the 'average woman worker':

Endless rounds of providing tea and food for her husband; making the bed; cleaning the house; carting the baby around; making the fire; ironing, etc...In contrast to her husband who feels free to read the newspaper and watch t.v. ('always with his "little darling" bottle of whiskey beside him') on returning home from work...She very bravely also dealt with the bedtime demands of

women – ‘When he gets to bed he then starts to demand another overtime from you’ (the third overtime), she said. ‘If you refuse that’s when the divorce starts – and then his “little darling” makes him think to batter you.’ (Johannesburg correspondent 1983: 10)

Responding to the ‘slightly nervous laughter’ that greeted Nabe’s remarks, Lydia Kompe, branch secretary of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, cautioned the audience not to take these remarks as a joke. ‘We are making a real appeal to the house,’ she warned, ‘we are calling for assistance in these problems.’ Kompe then dropped her own bombshell: ‘I am married, but for the sake of the struggle I wish I wasn’t. It stood in my way. Maybe marriage stands in the way of liberation’ (Johannesburg correspondent 1983: 10).

In 1983, Nabe’s and Kompe’s remarks were highly provocative. Outside a small circle of academic feminists, most South African political activists considered questions about marriage and the division of household labour as bourgeois distractions, divisive to the larger struggle against apartheid. Why, in a decidedly anti-feminist context, were women labour organisers the first grassroots activists to raise such issues and to challenge patriarchy both in the workplace and at home? An understanding of women’s trade union involvement earlier in the twentieth century – one that, in Emma Mashinini’s words, follows women ‘in all their travels’<sup>1</sup> – may help to answer this question.<sup>2</sup>

## Domesticity, dependency and industrialisation

In 1911, Mary Fitzgerald, then a recent immigrant from Ireland, became notorious for inciting violent confrontations among striking tramway workers, scabs and police, militant public actions that flouted accepted feminine behaviour. She also wrote provocative articles for the Labour Party newspaper, equating marriage with servitude and recommending radical policy initiatives. One of her columns described the aspiring bride as ‘blissfully unconscious that she’s giving her life to slavery’ (*Voice of Labour* 31.07.1909); another advocated that men pay wages to wives not working outside the home (Haysom nd]).<sup>3</sup> At a time when few women were involved in wage labour and all women were considered legal minors, she was virtually alone as a female union activist, although her ideas were similar to those of South Africa’s earliest self-identified feminist, Olive Schreiner. In her pioneering classic *Woman and Labour*, Schreiner wrote:

The fact that for equal work equally well performed by a man and by a woman, it is ordained that the woman on the ground of her sex alone shall receive a less recompense, is the nearest approach to a wilful and unqualified ‘wrong’ in the whole relation of woman to society today. That males of enlightenment and equity can for an hour tolerate the existence of this inequality has seemed to me always incomprehensible; and it is only explainable when one regards it as a result of the blinding effects of custom and habit. (Schreiner 1911: 24)

After the First World War, Fitzgerald founded the Women's Industrial League to promote equal pay for women and men. Her only contemporary among African women was the articulate, American-educated Charlotte Maxeke, who pressed the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union to support women's equality (Bradford 1987).<sup>4</sup>

Despite these strong voices for gender equity, South Africa's economy in the early twentieth century centred on the men who toiled underground mining gold and diamonds. Most women remained in small country towns or rural areas, where Africans sustained their families by planting and harvesting crops. Struggling against strong pressures to take jobs as domestic servants in middle-class households, poor women, both black and white, preferred instead to earn essential income more informally – black women brewing beer, doing laundry and charring; white women taking in boarders and sewing; and both groups providing sexual services for the thousands of single men who kept the county's mineral wealth flowing.<sup>5</sup>

From the mid-1920s, however, a new surge of industrial development accentuated the racial differences in women's working lives. As South Africa began to produce its own textiles, shoes, clothing and processed food, new jobs opened up for white and coloured women, as well as for black men. Still reeling from the upheaval of 1922, when a militant white mineworkers' strike nearly brought the country to a standstill, the newly elected pact government (combining the Labour and Nationalist parties) implemented policies that promoted the interests of white workers by reserving skilled jobs for them and by keeping virtually all Africans from joining registered trade unions. Fanny Klenerman, the leading organiser of white working women at this time and founder of the Women Workers' Union, reflected some of the period's ambivalence towards women in formal jobs. While favouring equal pay for women, she advocated higher wages for men so that women would not be forced to work. In testimony to the Economic and Wage Commission of 1925, she portrayed working women as weak and unprotected, arguing that 'women all over the world have become the prey of the exploiter' (Economic and Wage Commission 1925: 6). As the Depression intensified the effects of poverty from 1929 into the early 1930s, greater numbers of white women were drawn into wage work and sustained trade union activism.

## Commandos of working women

Anna Scheepers, who in 1938 became president of the Transvaal Garment Workers' Union (GWU), grew up in a family of nine children on a farm near Krugersdorp. After finishing school she spent two years struggling against her father who, despite his losses during the Depression, refused to allow her to work in Johannesburg – in his eyes 'the place of sin'. She finally said to him, 'Listen here, don't be foolish. I can look after myself...God will provide for me' (Scheepers interview). After seven months of working 16-hour shifts in a delicatessen, a friend got her a job in a garment factory. Johanna

Cornelius, later the national organiser and then general secretary of the GWU, was raised on a small farm outside Lichtenburg in the Transvaal, in a family of ten children. She moved to Johannesburg under similar circumstances:

In 1930 when the country was suffering from a very severe depression I started scheming how to find employment and applied for a position in the Lichtenburg Post Office as well as to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Months went by and as I did not receive any replies from either of the two, I went to Johannesburg on the 18th August, where I started work as a garment worker making mens [sic] clothing at the Powerplus Clothing. I joined the Garment Workers' Union soon after. (GWU nd: 2)

Scheepers and Cornelius were typical of the young, unmarried Afrikaner girls and women who left the countryside to take factory jobs during this period, helping to support families struck hard by drought and economic collapse from the late 1920s onward. Recently arrived in the cities, they lived and worked in closely knit communities – modest neighbourhoods of small, semi-detached homes, boarding houses and flats – where most men were miners, railway workers or artisans with strong traditions of trade union membership. Family members and friends not only worked side by side, but often lived together in lodgings or hostels, and spent their leisure time at dances, sporting events and church outings. In this new, polyglot urban setting, young people grew more independent, sometimes questioning their fathers' dictates and creating intense anxiety about the morality of young working girls and fears that families were crumbling under the impact of industrialisation.

These women began work in a climate of bitter, sometimes violent strikes in the Transvaal clothing industry, mainly over threats to slash wages to match those of lower-paid Cape workers. The newly hired young women brought an unaccustomed exuberance to work stoppages, and generated firm backing from their families and other unions for their actions. During a 1928 action in Germiston over the dismissal of three workers, newspapers described 'a strike of bright colours, gay processions, of laughter and joking, of music and dancing', an occasion, according to the headlines, for 'negotiations and jazz' (*Rand Daily Mail* 22.05.1928) . In October 1931, when some 2 300 workers in Johannesburg and Germiston, almost all white women, left their jobs, the union sent teams to collect money from miners, their strongest allies, and successfully staved off the threatened wage cuts.

When Transvaal garment workers walked off the job on 17 August 1932, police were called in immediately to disperse them, ushering in a period of heated, sometimes brutal, clashes between police and strikers. Numerous women were severely beaten with batons, clubs and boot spurs, and several were arrested. Locked up in a filthy cell, Johanna Cornelius and Gertie Guytes tried to mask their distress by playing a mouth organ and singing songs. Their choice of tunes, from 'Sarie Marais' to the 'Red Flag', reflected the developing cultural amalgam of their Afrikaner backgrounds with their

newly blossoming socialism and trade unionism. The lyrics they composed expressed their anger at the scabs who crossed the picket line to take their jobs:

Scabby, Scabby  
Give me your answer do,  
We'll be happy,  
If we can get a hold of you,  
It won't be a proper hiding,  
The police are always siding,  
But you'll look sweet,  
Between the sheets,  
With a bandaged limb or two. (Cornelius nd: 2)

Later in the evening, as Cornelius and Guytes lay shivering and fearful, unable to sleep, a group of men in civilian clothes burst through the cell door and informed them that they were free to leave. Hesitant to depart at night with strange men, they refused at first, until one of the men identified himself as the secretary of the Mine Workers' Union and explained that a crowd armed with axes, spades and guns had threatened to storm the prison if the local magistrate did not release the two women. Lifted over the heads of exuberant supporters gathered at the Church of Christ Hall near the jail, they were greeted with shouts of 'Speak, girls speak!' In her impromptu address to the crowd, Cornelius, then only 19, appealed not to traditions of labour or socialism, of which she still knew little, but to Afrikaner struggles against British domination: 'Our fathers fought for freedom,' she reminded her audience, 'and we are their daughters' (Sachs 1957: 92). Told afterwards that she had made a good speech, she replied, 'All I could remember was that I compared the whole event as a real fairy story, being saved from imprisonment by a commando of furious working men and women' (GWU nd: 8).

By the end of 1933, as South Africa emerged from the Depression, GWU membership soared to over 3 000 in just six months. The following year the skilled male tailors split off from the GWU and a new generation of young women, including Johanna and Hester Cornelius and Anna Scheepers, assumed leadership roles and began to build a flourishing union-based community that provided a network of cultural, political and social activities. By sending some women on trips abroad and by organising campaigns to the Cape, the union encouraged them to develop a new sense of militant, collective identity that changed their way of seeing the world. Cornelius wrote of her travel to the Soviet Union and England:

Four weeks we spent in Russia traveling from city to city visiting factories, workers' homes, public institutions, etc. I also had the pleasure of being present on 7th November at the Anniversary Celebrations of the Soviet Union held on the Red Square. On my journey I spent four weeks in Britain where I met many workers at meetings, and exchanged experiences with them. I was very surprised to find the British ordinary people, as I was brought up to distrust all Britishers and regarded them as our natural enemy. (GWU nd: 9)

As part of a broad-based effort to encourage new industrial workers to fight for improved wages and working conditions, several women took jobs in Cape Town clothing factories under assumed names to collect first-hand information on conditions, struggling against union leaders there whom Cornelius later depicted as ‘a group of reactionary old men who did everything possible to stultify the workers’ urge for better conditions’ (GWU nd: 13). The women also campaigned aggressively to establish unions among low-paid women elsewhere in the country. The reputation they earned for toughness and determination, reflected in horrified newspaper accounts, created new representations of working women that undermined stereotypes of their fragility and helplessness. The bitter 1936 textile strike at Consolidated Textile Mills at Industria near Johannesburg reinforced this image of resilience. When five garment workers were arrested, two of them protested that they could not go to prison, arguing, ‘Our husbands will kill us. They’re Greyshirts [fascists].’ Cornelius replied: ‘And if you don’t come, I’ll kill you. You bring toothbrushes and you come’ (du Toit interview). Refusing bail, they were imprisoned at the Johannesburg fort for five days until their fines were paid.

During the 1930s, the Transvaal GWU made deliberate efforts to reshape the identity of white working-class women to encourage a sense of class loyalty through both political and cultural activities. Union members regularly took part in May Day demonstrations and published articles in the union newspaper, the *Garment Worker*, expressing a pro-Soviet, anti-fascist stance. They also organised mass rallies against fascism and Nazism, working creatively to counter increasingly strident Afrikaner nationalist rhetoric against independent working-class movements, particularly the GWU. Cornelius recalled, ‘The Nazis in South Africa, as overseas, were a vicious crowd, and used to try to smash up our meeting [sic] with the use of bicycle chains, knives, guns, etc. They would stop at nothing, but that did not deter us from trying to educate the people against this menace threatening the whole of humanity’ (GWU nd: 14–15). During the Voortrekker Centenary Celebration of 1938, a dramatic mass re-enactment of the Great Trek, garment workers donned bonnets and long skirts and took part explicitly as union members. In response to Afrikaner nationalist attacks, they formed a cadre of union guards to protect their meetings. Parading at demonstrations in military fashion clad in blue and white uniforms (Brink 1983–84), their presence contributed to a sense of strength and solidarity as union members.

In order to encourage women to build their lives around union-related pursuits, the GWU also organised sports teams, built libraries and sponsored lectures on working-class history and contemporary political issues. Women wrote plays and poems, often didactic, that spoke of their struggles in the workplace and at home. ‘*Die Offerhande*’ (The Sacrifice), a drama published and produced in the early 1940s, indicted capitalism as a rotten, exploitative system and lauded the new non-oppressive government of workers and farmers in the Soviet Union. At strikes and rallies, women not only sang communist songs, the ‘International’ and the ‘Red Flag’ (translated into Afrikaans), but also composed their own lyrics condemning scabs who ‘smell of rotten fish’ and seeking unity against ‘slavery and fascist law’ (Brink 1983–84: 39–41).

Afrikaner nationalist attacks on the GWU from the late 1930s onward formed part of a carefully orchestrated campaign to keep the Afrikaner working class safely within the nationalist fold and uncontaminated by ideas of class consciousness that might threaten the entire racial (and class) order. The GWU and associated unions were natural targets as militant groups, often with visible Jewish involvement and leadership (ES Sachs, general secretary of the union, was a Jewish immigrant to South Africa and a former member of the Communist Party of South Africa [CPSA]). The prospect of Afrikaner women departing from the authority of church and family seemed particularly threatening. Indeed, one of the cultural groups formed to intervene in the struggle with the GWU was composed of clergy anxious to prevent the ‘spiritual enslavement’ of women workers (O’Meara 1983: 86).

Appeals to union workers as women at this time were less informed by feminist attitudes, which were weak in South Africa, and used more as a means to solidify their class consciousness. Articulating a contemporary socialist position on women’s issues in the union newspaper, Sachs espoused women’s rights, but attacked ‘bourgeois’ women’s organisations for ignoring low wages, sub-standard housing, government callousness toward expectant mothers, and the absence of unemployment and health insurance for working women. This approach to ‘the woman question’, which emerged in late nineteenth century Europe, was further elaborated in the course of the Russian Revolution. Although the CPSA did not always have women on its agenda,<sup>6</sup> through the continuing efforts of communist trade unionists such as Ray Alexander, this socialist heritage eventually became an integral part of some South African unions.

## World War Two and its aftermath

Wartime conditions between 1939 and 1945 created new demands on an already expanding economy. Local industries began manufacturing artillery, munitions, uniforms and military equipment in order to support the general Allied effort and to sustain the 300 000 South African troops in North Africa, Madagascar and Italy. Black men filled most of the occupational vacuum left by departing white soldiers; but their absence opened up a small number of non-traditional jobs for white and coloured women, particularly in munitions factories. Paid lower wages than the men they replaced, these women engineering workers caused intense, though temporary, anxiety for their male co-workers. When men were demobilised after the war, the newly trained women returned to their previous lives.

Wartime economic growth continued in the postwar years, partly as a result of expanded overseas investment in industrial production. In this era’s search for cheap labour, black men filled most new positions in secondary industry, following a trend that began in the late 1930s as the fusion government expanded the number of skilled jobs for Afrikaner men. As Afrikaner poverty diminished and more men moved into

trade, commerce and the professions, younger white women increasingly shunned factory work. Their mobility created new openings for African women who, in the early 1940s, began a massive migration to the cities in response to new opportunities for black men and growing hunger and impoverishment in the countryside. In Transvaal clothing factories, these women joined increasing numbers of coloured women already working as machinists.

### **Solidarity fragmented: Transvaal garment workers in the postwar period**

When factories first began to engage African women their numbers jumped rapidly in a brief period because they received lower pay than other workers under the terms of an out-of-date wage determination. Manufacturers justified their action by claiming that the Industrial Council agreement did not apply to Africans. The union and the employers' association promptly contested the issue and finally resolved that the Industrial Council should take the matter to the Supreme Court. Ruling on 9 November 1944, the Court agreed with the union, arguing that since women were not required to carry passes, they were exempt from the provisions of the Industrial Conciliation Act that prevented 'pass bearing' Africans from belonging to registered trade unions and sharing in the benefits of Industrial Council agreements. Immediately after the judgement, the union, now able to control undercutting, demanded that the Industrial Council claim back wages for all the African women who had been underpaid. It also began to recruit African women as members, appointing a black shop steward, Lucy Twala Mvubelo, as organiser.

Mvubelo, educated at Inanda Seminary, had formed the Bantu Domestic Service Association in 1937 to protect the interests of the elite group of ex-boarding school household workers to which she belonged. Having left school because her parents could not afford to educate both her and her brother, she observed, 'You know, Africans believe that it's better to educate a boy than a girl' (Mvubelo interview). In 1942, married with a five-month-old son, she learned that clothing factories were looking for workers. Although a manager had just informed three other women that there were no openings, Mvubelo went in anyway, insisting, 'No, you haven't seen me.' She was hired on the spot and sent to the union office to get her certificate. Reflecting on her decision to seek the job, she explained, 'Well, I chose a garment factory because it was paying more than what the teachers were earning. Most teachers and nurses left their profession and came into the industry in those years' (Mvubelo interview).

While leaders of the GWU continued their efforts to forge a self-conscious body of working-class women during the 1940s, the tone of union discourse began to shift after 1945. Growing white prosperity, the increasingly vigorous racist campaigns of Afrikaner nationalist organisations and heightened anti-communist sentiment made class analysis increasingly suspect. Furthermore, with the initial energy and excitement of the union's early organising years long past, much of its business had grown bureaucratic and

routine. And, despite the union's continued theoretical commitment to non-racialism, the attitudes of some members forced GWU leaders to make policy decisions that, by their own admission, violated these principles. In 1940, as increasing numbers of coloured women entered the industry, they were incorporated into the union as a separate No. 2 branch.

After the National Party came to power in 1948, pressure on the union intensified still further. With the passage of the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953, all Africans, women included, were prohibited from belonging to registered trade unions. As soon as the new law was passed, the GWU established a separate No. 3 branch for African women, and employers immediately began to implement drastic reductions in the wages of those already employed and to replace higher paid white women with Africans.

Racial separation within the union and discriminatory wage scales reflected the divisions in women's lives. Black women now confronted enormous pressures starkly different from those of their white co-workers, and from the young white operatives of the 1930s. The threat of passes for women, the insult of an inferior 'Bantu education' for their children, and forced removals of long-established communities provided relentless reminders that racial oppression was an inescapable fact of daily life. When cohesive Johannesburg neighbourhoods such as Sophiatown were destroyed, officials scattered their inhabitants over the bleak expanses of Soweto, far from the city centre.

Under these conditions, as the 1950s progressed, it became less and less likely that the women who worked alongside one another, and who ate lunch together on the sidewalks outside the factories, would also share the kinship and neighbourhood connections of their white counterparts a generation earlier. As predominantly married women with families, they found their time too limited for the sports, plays and lectures that had filled the lives of young, single white women and reinforced their sense of belonging to an active, class-based community. And for those women inclined toward politics, the inequity of race was more pressing than that of class. Emphasising this racial division, Emma Mashinini described the conditions in the massive garment factory, with over 1 000 workers, where she took a job in 1956:

Of course, we had separate facilities. Canteen, toilets, changing rooms – all these were separated according to sex and according to colour. We had to address the whites as 'sir' and 'madam', while they often called us by our first names, or, if we were being shouted at, we were called '*meid*' and '*Kaffir*'. (Mashinini 1989: 21)

Although the thriving work-based political and cultural community of the past had faded and factories were forced to divide workers according to race, some black women nonetheless vividly recall instances of comradeship across racial lines, particularly during the annual May Day celebrations of all union women, black and white, and during episodes of conflict. One woman spoke fondly of the yearly celebration: 'We used to get together; sometimes we had meetings, tea, all the nice things. And some of us used to



Demonstration in Johannesburg to protest the banning of Solly Sachs in 1952. Johanna Cornelius and Sachs lead the procession.



Scene from the same 1952 demonstration in Johannesburg.

get home very late. Even if you were sick, even if you were far from home, but when that day draws nearer, you would be together with the other workers' (Anonymous interview<sup>7</sup>). Similarly, Sinah Jacobs animatedly described a march in 1952 after the bosses had closed the factories in response to a strike: women paraded through the streets chanting, 'We want work, we want work; open up the factories, we want work!' (Jacobs interview). A violent demonstration to protest Sachs's banning came shortly thereafter. Crowding on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall, women removed their shoes and turned spiked heels into weapons against the charging mounted police.

In the coming years, however, the pressures against overt political involvement increased, leaving some black organisers in a difficult position. When the left-wing, non-racial South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) formed in 1955, Mvubelo and other leaders of the GWU of African Women joined the new federation, although the main branch of the union continued to belong to the racially segregated South African Trades and Labour Council.<sup>8</sup> Mvubelo was elected as a SACTU vice-president in 1955, and then unanimously re-elected in 1956. In that year, 20 members of the GWU of African Women attended the SACTU conference in Cape Town, and Mvubelo was selected as the SACTU representative to attend the national conference of the Federation of South African Women, a new multiracial group pressing for women's equality and an end to oppressive apartheid laws. The following year, however, the African GWU abruptly withdrew from the Congress – a move that Mvubelo later attributed to SACTU's decision to affiliate with the ANC, explaining that 'politics was a death-knell to us' (Mvubelo interview). The alternative trade union federation, the Federation of Free African Trade Unions (FOFATUSA), which garment workers were

instrumental in forming in 1959, was ostensibly aimed at keeping ‘trade union activities within the bounds of worker grievances’.<sup>9</sup>

As the registered union placed greater political restraints on its African counterpart, members involved in the broader political activities connected with the ANC had to conceal their politics because of the white union’s disapproval. Reflecting on the perils of political involvement, one woman explained, ‘I used to belong to the ANC until it was banned [in 1960] and then...I stopped my actions because I could see my background was very poor. If I the breadwinner goes to jail, then the whole family would go down. So I stopped, I shut my mouth’ (Anonymous interview).

Despite the pressures against political involvement, many black garment workers took an active part in political groups of the period that organised around both women’s and working-class issues. Although some white workers may have joined them, the union leaders were not among them. In the late 1940s, the No. 2 branch donated funds to the Passive Resistance Movement; to the leftist newspaper, the *Guardian*; and to the South African Institute of Race Relations. It also joined the Council of Non-European Trade Unions, and encouraged black members to join the ANC, which from 1949 onward became a forceful voice for mass resistance to the apartheid state. In 1947, Hetty du Preez, No. 2 branch organiser, worked on launching a left-wing, non-racial women’s organisation. Du Preez, Mvubelo, Sybil Hedley and Betty Flusk were among the convenors of the first national conference of the Federation of South African Women in 1954 – the multiracial women’s organisation, part of the broader anti-apartheid movement, that spearheaded massive demonstrations against passes for women. Du Preez also joined the first National Executive Committee of the Federation. However, unlike the Food and Canning Workers’ Union, a non-racial union with a large female membership, the black branches of the GWU never formally affiliated with the Women’s Federation.

Emblematic of black women’s most pressing concerns from the mid-1950s, Lillian Ngoyi, the most politically prominent garment worker during this period, earned her acclaim as a leader in the struggle against passes. Vice-president of the Women’s Federation, she also served on the Executive Committee of the GWU of African Women, as the first African woman on the National Executive Committee of the ANC and as Transvaal president of the ANC Women’s League. Ngoyi, ‘the most talked of woman in politics’ (Mphahlele 1956: 105 [Chapman reprint]), worked in clothing factories from 1945 to 1966 and recalled the demonstration of thousands of garment workers after Solly Sachs’s banning in 1952 as a formative political experience. In a typically provocative *Drum* magazine portrait, Es’kia Mphahlele recounts her rhetorical style, chiding men for their inaction and underscoring women’s potential strength:



Lillian Ngoyi

Who is Lillian Ngoyi? The woman factory worker who is tough granite on the outside, but soft and compassionate deep down in her. The woman who three years ago was hardly known in Non-European politics. The woman whose rise to fame has been phenomenal.

Mrs. Ngoyi is a brilliant orator. She can toss an audience on her little finger, get men grunting with shame and a feeling of smallness and infuse everyone with renewed courage.

Her speech always teems with vivid figures of speech. Mrs. Ngoyi will say: ‘We don’t want men who wear skirts under their trousers. If they don’t want to act, let us women exchange garments with them.’ (Mphahlele 1956: 106–108 [Chapman reprint])

Thus, by the 1950s, a more stratified, racially diverse workforce had developed. Despite continued gender uniformity, rapid job fragmentation was producing substantial inequalities among different groups of workers. These status divisions, combined with intense pressure from new state policies and Afrikaner nationalist organisations, made class-based unity more tenuous and the GWU more defensive, turning from the working-class consciousness of the 1930s to a more narrowly-based, apolitical ‘bread and butter’ trade unionism that it passed on to its African counterpart.

For the new women workers of the 1940s and 50s, highly paid by comparison with other black women, factory work afforded many advantages. Well-placed socially, and relatively established as urban residents, they became staunch members and leaders of religious, community and sometimes political organisations (Berger 1992).<sup>10</sup> Yet, in the face of forced removals, political repression and racially exploitative legislation, they also saw their lives as difficult and whatever stability they achieved as fragile. Constance Belle, although content with her work and able to support her family on her wages and her husband’s pay as a policeman, noted nonetheless, ‘I have never seen money written non-white. We go to the same shops for the whites, but the money’s not the same.’ Never politically involved, she felt unable to change things, ‘but I don’t like it’ (Belle interview).

## **‘We want work, not passes’: Cape food and canning workers**

While events of the 1940s and 1950s challenged Transvaal garment workers in ways that ultimately changed the character of their union, another group of working women replaced them on the cutting edge of political change: the food and canning employees of the Cape Peninsula. Living and labouring in small rural communities in the heart of the fruit-growing areas, their experience differed from that of most clothing workers at the time, whether in the north or in nearby Cape Town. Tiny houses clustered in

townships and camps near the factories contributed to a deep involvement in local issues. Before the Group Areas Act enforced strict residential segregation, their racially mixed communities and factories provided a basis for non-racial solidarity. Though women made up a high percentage of the labour force, gender was conceptualised as an integral part of struggles defined on class or racial grounds. In these struggles, and particularly in the campaign against passes for African women in the Cape, female food and canning workers played a significant role.

Two primary structural factors shaped women's activism in the Food and Canning Workers' Union

(FCWU): their predominance in seasonal labour, which gave them few individual options for improving their situation, and the support of working-class communities in which women, men and children often laboured in the same factories. Liz Abrahams, who during the 1950s became the union's general secretary, was typical. 'I grew up in Paarl,' she recounted, 'and we were eight children, four brothers and four sisters...my father was a sickly man. I decided to leave school, so that I could help my mother;...My mother worked in the factory when there was no union yet, and that's where I joined her' (Lipman 1984: 89–90).

Harsh working conditions gradually began to change in the early 1940s, when Ray Alexander turned her organising efforts to food and canning workers. Born in Varaklan, a small town in Latvia, into a religious Jewish family, Alexander became involved early in underground communist activity. By the age of 15, when she went to Riga to study for a teaching certificate at the technical college, she belonged to an organisation whose members faced the continual threat of arrest. Learning that the police were searching for her daughter, Alexander's mother arranged to send her to South Africa. She arrived in Cape Town in 1929, not quite 16, but already an ardent advocate of the eastern European and Soviet revolutionary tradition.

Shortly after her arrival, Alexander began assisting the organisers of a number of different unions, doing office work, visiting workers in factories and homes and taking part in picket lines during strikes. She improved her English by working through Olive Schreiner's book *Woman and Labour*, which she read after learning about the Women's Enfranchisement League. 'Don't you women have the vote?' Alexander asked. 'I was shocked,' she explained in her autobiography, 'because even in Latvia, which had inherited the Soviet constitution, women had the vote' (Simons 2004: 52). From 1933 onward Alexander played a key role in forming numerous new unions in meat and fish processing plants, before she turned her prodigious energy to the food and canning workers whose numbers were mushrooming under wartime conditions.



Ray Alexander



Officials of the Food and Canning Workers' Union (1952), left to right, Bettie du Toit, Oscar Mpetha, Ray Alexander, Marie Williams and David Jantjes.

At the time of her banning in 1953, a union flyer lauded Alexander's organising skills and her fierce commitment to the struggle for freedom and justice. As the main speaker at a meeting to celebrate her accomplishments, Oscar Mpetha of the African FCWU spoke with evangelical fervour: 'Until Ray came we were slaves,' and, 'If Ray dies we must die. Hand in hand and with all our hearts we must try to get Ray back.' Mpetha concluded, 'If you feel she must come back, then say so,' to which members responded resoundingly: 'Yes!'<sup>11</sup>

Ray Alexander brought to the union a strong commitment to non-racialism and economic equality and, once her own children were born (including a son Johan, named after Johanna Cornelius), a keen personal understanding of the strains in the lives of working women with families. In her autobiography, she relates one of many incidents of conflict between her hectic organising schedule and the demands of childcare. As she was packing up to go to a conference in Durban:

I quickly fed the children, bathed them and put them to bed. Johan and Tanya went right off to sleep, but Mary was still awake when I started to pack my papers. Then I was called to the telephone and while I was away Mary burned my papers with a candle...I tried to pacify Mary, but she didn't want me to go away and was in a terrible state. I had to give her as much love as I possibly could, and explained to her how important the conference was. 'Let other people go,' she said, 'not you. We need you here.' (Simons 2004: 227)

Despite Alexander's commitment to racial equality, and more favourable conditions than in the Transvaal, maintaining a policy of non-racial trade unionism was a continual struggle. In 1947, Labour department officials threatened to deregister some FCWU branches if black membership continued, forcing the union to form a separate African FCWU. Although the 1944 Supreme Court ruling had allowed African women to join the Transvaal GWU, the Department of Labour only extended this decision to the food industry seven years later – two years before the Native (Labour) Settlement of Disputes Act forced African women to return to a racially exclusive union. Though separation caused innumerable practical problems, leaders sought to ensure that the two groups were as equal as possible, given official recognition only of the coloured union. Frances Baard recalls, '...we worked together all the time like we were one union. We always had our meetings and discussions together, and all our strikes we did together too' (Baard 1986: 24). Because the African branch in Port Elizabeth refused to move its offices from Korsten, officially a coloured area, its leaders were hounded by the SB, the 'Special Branch' of the police force. Again in Baard's words:

The minister of labour was always saying that he's going to bleed the African workers' unions, he's going to bleed them to death...The one time at a meeting, a policeman came with his gun and he put it right here, near us, pointing at us. 'I am taking your fingerprints.' With the gun right next to us? What does he think we are going to do to him? But all this trying to make us scared and making things difficult for us, it didn't work because we still managed to organise the workers during those troubled times. (Baard 1986: 30–31)

The left-wing political orientation of the FCWU and its deep involvement with SACTU and the Congress Alliance led naturally to a close connection with the Federation of South African Women, as did Ray Alexander's position as a founding member of the group. Other union members at the initial conference included AM Coe, Frances Baard and L Diedericks of Port Elizabeth, and Martha Nqxesha of East London. In 1955, the union formally affiliated with the Federation, thereby encouraging politically aware women to combine labour organising and political work.

In the Western Cape, the extension of passes to women formed an important aspect of the effort to expel the region's black population in order to create a 'coloured labour preference area'. The registration of African women began in earnest in 1954, accom-



Frances Baard, Secretary,  
African Food and Canning Workers  
Union, Port Elizabeth.

panied by massive arrests, prosecutions and deportations. Within two years, 2 500 families had been ‘endorsed out’ of the region and over 2 800 African women illegally in the Cape were ordered to leave. The distribution of passes to women followed late in 1959 and, within three months, some 12 000 had been issued.

In the struggle against this new turn in the pass laws, the FCWU and the African FCWU played a leading role in alliance with the ANC. Adopting tactics the union had used effectively in its early organising years, women went from door to door to mobilise support. They also stood at the trucks sent to issue passes, explaining to women that the government was issuing passes in order to be able to control people more easily, dictating where they could live and work.

Port Elizabeth, with a heritage of militancy, an active ANC branch and uncontrolled African movement before 1953, was the scene of some of the most successful women’s struggles. When, in November 1956, managers at the city’s largest canning factory posted notices announcing that all African women should bring passes from the Labour Bureau, women ignored the directive to go to work as usual, remaining at the gate as others entered the factory. When ordered to come forward with their passes, they refused, arguing, ‘We want work, not passes.’ As men left their jobs in a gesture of support, the manager was forced to meet with a workers’ committee and agreed to take the women back without the new, hated documents. Frances Baard (1986), an activist in the campaign in Port Elizabeth, outlined the government’s tactics of sending trucks into the townships to issue passes, making women fear they would lose their jobs if they refused. Anti-pass organisers tried to counter these efforts by standing next to the trucks and trying to persuade the women not to collect the passes.

While leaders involved in these political efforts exposed members to the discourse of resistance in a way that galvanised many to take part in opposition politics, the union developed its greatest strength through active concern with health, housing, childcare and other aspects of community and personal life. In this respect, the African FCWU and the FCWU were as much vehicles for community organising as they were an effective trade union. Like the GWU during the 1930s, the union sought to respond to all aspects of women’s lives. This emphasis, undoubtedly shaped by women’s strong presence in the organisation, allowed them to integrate the worlds of work, family and community and contributed to the ability to mobilise when communities were threatened with destruction under the Group Areas Act. Indeed, the strategy of organising around such varied issues was, in itself, a challenge to the separate boundaries of work and community. In an industry with high levels of seasonal female labour, this organisational approach and involvement with daily local issues had the potential to keep women active, even during the off season. Highlighting the continuing importance of such work, the union newspaper urged:

Branches must take part in the economic, political and social lives of the members in their areas, which means that it is the branch’s business to see that

the streets in which the workers live should be clean and lit at night, that the children should have creches, that there should be enough schools for the children, that there should be pre- and post-natal clinics, a district nurse, and above all to see that the people struggle for democratic rights to vote and be elected to all governing bodies of our country. (*Morning Star/Ikwezi Lomso* 2, no. 3, July 1954: 3)

A memorandum that Alexander wrote for the Women's Legal Disabilities Commission of 1947 outlined the perspective that shaped union policies on women: blaming an outdated legal system for women's difficult position and seeking support from industrialists and the state for social services and protective legislation to alleviate their double burden. Diminishing the conflict between work and family would require improved confinement allowances, more adequate resting and dining space for non-European workers, more numerous crèches and nurseries and, finally, communal kitchens to free women from the double burden of 'working hard in the factory and at home' (FCWU 1947: 4–6). Appropriate to testimony before a state commission, the memorandum located the problem and its solution with the state and employers; by supporting collective solutions, these bodies also might address the issue of inequalities in the household division of labour.

An interview with Frances Baard highlights the difference between this approach and later analyses, such as those of Tembi Nabe and Lydia Kompe, that confronted the division of household work and power more directly. When asked whether the Women's Federation had ever taken an interest in the position of women in the home, she hesitated. But, after grasping the question's meaning, she replied firmly, 'No, not husband and wife, wife and husband in the house, no. I don't think that (laugh)...'

Q: You think those were not important?

'No they were not important for us. Of course, as a friend I would go to a husband and say why do you do this and this and this.'

Q: But you didn't see that as a political issue?

'No, No' (Baard interview).<sup>12</sup>

This depoliticisation of domestic relations did not mean, however, that leaders ignored the division of power within the family. Ray Alexander, in particular, was intensely concerned about the issue, particularly as it affected women's attitudes towards the union. Accordingly, she often intervened to persuade reluctant husbands to be more flexible in their attitudes and to share household responsibilities so that women could attend meetings. When a union official impregnated a woman member, she convinced the woman's irate father to allow his daughter to return home. Alexander then insisted on making such incidents the subject of public discussion and firmly rejected the position of Oscar Mpetha, an African leader who argued:

This was not a union matter, but a private matter,...and in his tradition, if a chief visited an area he would be provided with a young woman. He implied that union officials were like chiefs, and I immediately replied:

*This tradition cannot be accepted by us. It is a backward tradition – insulting, degrading, and harmful to women. It is not a private matter. If he will not object to the injustice to women, women union members will be afraid to serve on branch committees or as shop stewards.* (Simons 2004: 230)

In making her case so forcefully, Alexander early on confronted arguments against women's equality based on 'tradition' – a debate that came to a head during the early 1990s when South Africa's new, democratic Constitution was being drafted.

Both daily union work and political campaigns encouraged women's leadership at all levels. In testimony to the Industrial Legislation Commission, Alexander responded to a question concerning women in trade unions:

Women workers make as good trade unionists as men, and it is no more difficult to organise the women than the men. In fact they are more often more loyal to the Union than the men as the Union has not only helped to improve wages and conditions of work but also raised their status. (FCWU nd: 2)

Later reports verify this observation. Wolseley leader Rachael Zeeman (Sass) argued in an interview that women were more persistent and less easily swayed by arguments of the bosses: 'They stand more united than the men!' (Goode 1987: 47).

Alexander recalled how she personally prodded women who were reluctant to assume responsibility. To women who insisted, 'Oh, I can't do it,' she would respond, 'Look, comrades, I don't know what you can do. But, I'm a woman and I do it, and there's no reason why other women can't do it' (Simons interview).

The women who assumed these positions came from impoverished backgrounds and clearly responded to the union's call to struggle 'for a better life'. Elizabeth Mafekeng<sup>13</sup> began working at H. Jones in Paarl in the early 1930s at the age of 14 in order to support the grandmother who had raised her. Married to a worker at the Langeberg Cooperative in Paarl in 1938, Mafekeng took a month off for the birth of each of her 11 children, and then returned to work with the baby on her back. She became a shop steward in 1941 and an organiser in 1946. As an active member of the ANC Women's League, Mafekeng refused to take out a pass and was dismissed from her job in 1953, after working for 21 years for the same firm. Through political involvement she met women from all over South Africa and travelled to eastern Europe, China, the Soviet Union and Britain. She described this trip as 'An unforgettable experience...To live in a country where there is no colour bar is like breathing clean air after falling in a drain' (*New Age* 12.11.1959). Shortly after she was elected vice-president of the Women's League in 1958, the government ordered Mafekeng's banishment to Southe (a remote

town in the Northern Cape), prompting an uprising of 3 000 supporters in Paarl. According to newspaper accounts, crowds marched along the dusty roads, clashing with police and chanting, 'Mrs. Mafekeng will be avenged,' and 'Kill Verwoerd, kill De Wet Nel, kill the police' (*Rand Daily Mail* 10.11.1959).<sup>14</sup> Not willing to endure the threatened isolation, she fled across the mountains into Lesotho (then Basutoland) with her two-month-old child, Uhuru, the Swahili word for freedom. After her flight, she proclaimed:

The struggle must go on...There must be more Elizabeths to carry the struggle along. Even in the desert there will be no place left because we will never stop saying: Africa must come back. *Freedom in our lifetime.* (New Age 12.11.1959)

Frances Baard, like Mafekeng, was a leader never far removed from the women and men among whom she worked. After various jobs, including domestic work and a teaching post from which she was fired because a man was preferred in the one-teacher school, Baard married and stopped working at her paid job. She explained:

After my children were born I started working again, but now I went to work at the factories because I was a housewife. We had got a house, and at the factory I could come home after work to look after the house and my children...It was mostly women who were working in our factory, and many had children. They used to employ women in the canning factories because...the women always work faster than the men with all the peeling and cutting and taking the pips out and with those factories you can't be slow;...And then too, they could pay the women less than they paid the men. (Baard 1986: 21–2)

Until then, she had paid little attention to politics. Speaking of her life as a newly married woman, she observed:

But at that time I wasn't worried about politics. I didn't even understand them. I just accepted the way things were. And my husband, he didn't understand anything about politics either. We just lived there in New Brighton, and he worked in the motor industry, and I stayed at home and looked after the house and the children. (Baard 1986: 18)

When the union formed at the Jones factory (in 1948), she was elected organising secretary. Drawn to an ANC meeting after her shock at seeing people forced to sleep outside on a cold, rainy night for lack of accommodation, Baard soon was involved in the Women's League and later became a member of SACTU'S National Executive Committee. After her husband died in 1952, she assumed sole responsibility for raising her four children. In 1956 Baard was among 156 people arrested in the famous Treason Trial, which drained the energy and resources of many leaders of the Congress Alliance until their eventual acquittal in 1961. Among those released before the end of the trial,

Baard continued her trade union and women's organising until she was rearrested and banned in 1963. She spent a difficult year in solitary confinement, followed by a five-year prison sentence. Recalling this ordeal, she reflected:

I think they were trying to kill me somehow, but my spirit was too strong. I have always been a church-goer, but they wouldn't even allow me to go to church...But my spirit kept me alive because I knew that freedom would come one day, and my faith in God too, kept me strong. (Baard 1986: 74)

## Conclusion

As the two most active groups of organised women engaged in industrial labour by the 1940s and 1950s, Transvaal garment workers and food and canning workers at the Cape faced contrasting material situations, and differed markedly in their responses. The GWU was increasingly divided between smaller groups of older white women and growing numbers of black women. Torn between loyalty to a union that had served them well since the Depression and families and churches increasingly vehement in support of Afrikaner racism, these women amended their class-conscious ideology of the past, which theoretically would have meant inclusion of all workers across racial lines. Instead they retreated to a less ideological trade unionism that allowed for co-operation with black women within the confines of increasingly racist legal constraints.

In the food and canning industry, objective differences of gender and race were considerably less marked than in Transvaal garment factories and the distinct conditions in many parts of the Cape until well into the 1950s meant that non-racial slums often housed both African and coloured families. While some apartheid laws of the decade affected the two groups differently, they were not necessarily pitted against each other, and both groups were increasingly deprived of even the meagre rights they once had possessed.

Despite these changes and contrasts, for both black and white women trade unions remained one of the most important arenas of women's collective organising from the 1930s to the 1960s. Unions brought women into active public life, defying contemporary beliefs that they should accept their political and legal subordination without complaint. Through union activities, women were politicised, introduced to the pressing issues of the time and to a new world of debate, organising and protest. These experiences transformed the women involved, as well as the groups they helped to launch and sustain. Within these new political spaces, some women challenged racist practices and institutions, struggling to interact with one another on a basis of relative equality; they also acquired the skills to launch new groups with gender-specific objectives. In all these ways, trade union activism changed women's personal and collective identities, helping to shape the contours of a later South African feminist agenda that would challenge not only the unions, but also political organisations such as the ANC, which continued to maintain that national liberation should precede gender equity.

By the early 1960s, however, most unions remained male-dominated, receptive neither to women's leadership nor to their particular concerns. They still awaited the confrontations ahead in the 1970s and 80s, when independent unions began a new surge of organising in industries that employed both women and men. In this phase of trade union struggles, increasing numbers of women – such as Tembi Nabe and Lydia Kompe – began to insist that sexual harassment and the household division of labour were not simply individual matters, but political questions that must be addressed by trade unions, political organisations, the state, and the men with whom they worked and lived.

## NOTES

- 1 For more detailed information on all of these issues, see Berger (1992).
- 2 For the purposes of this chapter, I would propose a broad understanding of 'feminism' as encompassing movements and ideologies that place a primary, though not necessarily exclusive, emphasis on achieving gender equity in social, economic, political, family and sexual relationships. Because of the many possible concerns among individuals and groups that identify themselves as feminist, some scholars and activists favour the plural form 'feminisms'.
- 3 I am grateful to the author for permission to cite her work and to Baruch Hirson for bringing it to my attention.
- 4 Among the male founders of the ANC, Sol Plaatje was an advocate of women's right to vote.
- 5 White (1990) shows women controlling and benefiting from changing forms of sex work; a similar long-term historical analysis remains to be done for South Africa.
- 6 A 1935 article in *Umsebenzi* chastised the party for ignoring International Women's Day and neglecting to work among women. The writer (possibly Ray Alexander) admonished, 'The Party must learn from this failure and must endeavor to set up special organisations for drawing women into the struggle.' See *Umsebenzi*, 16 March 1935.
- 7 She was one of the women I interviewed who chose to remain anonymous.
- 8 GWU leaders repeatedly pressed the South African Trade and Labour Council and its successor, the Trade Union Council of South Africa, to liberalise their racial policies.
- 9 South African Congress of Trade Unions, Annual Report and Balance Sheet for the Year Ended March, 1957, Carter-Karis Collection, Northwestern University, 2:LS2:30/8. During a large protest in 1958, however, Mvubelo took a strong stand 'on behalf of all the African women in my organisation who are opposed to the passes'. See Golden City Post, 23 November 1958. Leo Kuper Papers, Ser. 4, Box 20, Status of Women, Northwestern University. Although Mvubelo disapproved of the close relationship that developed between FOFATUSA and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), two days before the fateful demonstration at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960, Mvubelo presided over a FOFATUSA-sponsored meeting supporting the planned PAC action.
- 10 Chapter 12 explores their community position more fully.
- 11 Minutes of Special General Meeting, 3 October 1953.
- 12 South African Institute of Race Relations Oral Archive No. 16, page 23. I am indebted to F Baard and the SAIRR for permission to use the transcript of this interview.
- 13 Sources spell her name both as Mafekeng and Mafeking.
- 14 DeWet Nel, Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, had signed the banishment order.

## REFERENCES

- Baard F (1986) (as told to Barbie Schreiner) *My spirit is not banned*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Berger I (1992) *Threads of solidarity: Women in South African industry, 1900–1980*. Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press/James Currey.
- Bradford H (1987) *A taste of freedom: The ICU in rural South Africa 1924–1930*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Brink E (1983–84) Plays, poetry and production: The literature of the garment workers. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 9(8): 32–53.
- Cornelius J (nd) My Experience of the Germiston gaol in 1932. Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, Trade Unions, South Africa, File on the GWU.
- Economic and Wage Commission (1925) Evidence of the South African Women Workers' Union, Part 1. September 3.
- FCWU (Food and Canning Workers' Union) (1947) Union's Memorandum and Evidence to the Women's Legal Disabilities Commission. May.
- FCWU (nd) Replies Submitted to questionnaire received from the Industrial Legislation Commission. Cape Town.
- Goode R (1987) Struggles and strikes in the cannery: The great Wolseley strike. Paper presented at the Conference on the History of the Western Cape, University of Cape Town.
- GWU (Garment Workers' Union of South Africa) (nd) Biography of Johanna Jacoba Cornelius. University of the Witwatersrand.
- Haysom L (nd) Mary Fitzgerald. Unpublished manuscript.
- Johannesburg correspondent (1983) Workshop on women. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 9(3): 7–17.
- Lipman B (1984) *We make freedom: Women in South Africa*. London: Pandora Press.
- Mashinini E (1989) *Strikes have followed me all my life: A South African autobiography*. London: The Women's Press.
- Mphahlele E (1956) Masterpiece in Bronze. Drum, March. Reprinted in M Chapman (ed) *The 'Drum' decade: Stories from the 1950s*. Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press.
- O'Meara D (1983) *Volksparkitalisme: Class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934–1948*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sachs ES (1957) *Rebels daughters*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.
- Schreiner O (1911) *Woman and labour*. London: T.F. Unwin.
- Simons R (2004) *All my life and all my strength*. (Edited by R Suttner) Johannesburg: STE Publishers.
- White L (1990) *The comforts of home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## INTERVIEWS

- Anonymous, Johannesburg, 30 June 1983.
- Baard Frances, Johannesburg, 15 July 1982. Interview by C Sideris and D Cachalia.
- Belle Constance, Johannesburg, 1 July 1983.
- Du Toit Bettie, London, 26 October 1979.
- Jacobs Sinah, Johannesburg, 28 June 1983.
- Mvubelo Lucy, Johannesburg, 17 June 1983.
- Scheepers Anna, Johannesburg, 1 July 1983.
- Simons Ray Alexander, Lusaka, 20 July 1989.

## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

- Carter-Karis Collection, Northwestern University.
- Food and Canning Workers' Union. Archives, University of Cape Town.
- Garment Workers' Union of South Africa. Archives. University of the Witwatersrand.

# Feminisms, motherisms, patriarchies and women's voices in the 1950s

NOMBONISO GASA

It had the effect of making the people confident and fearless, prepared to defy the laws, to be prepared to go to jail and meet any situation. That was the importance of it. It was the beginning of a new situation, which led even to a person facing the death penalty with confidence. The Campaign brought about a situation in which people were not arrested just by chance but by plan. This meant organisation...The movement called for volunteers. In the Eastern Cape, it was called *Amadela Kufa*, the defiers of death. You can see from this that a revolutionary situation was emerging. (Sisulu 2001: 79)

The 1950s marked a decisive shift in the level, character and activities of the liberation movement, led by the African National Congress (ANC). This built on the foundation laid by the patient work of people like Reverend (later Canon) James Calata and Dr AB Xuma, who painstakingly built the organisation even in its weakest period. Calata took three years to complete his mandated organising tour of the country, visiting branches of the ANC, discussing conditions and what needed to be done. In those days, resources and travel were limited and difficult, quite unlike what we know today (Karis & Carter 1973: 408).

The emergence of the militant ANC Youth League (ANCYL), launched at the same time as the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) in 1943, is correctly credited with this dramatic shift which radicalised the ANC. However, it must be emphasised that the ANCYL's stance would have remained at the level of slogans, or at least that the Defiance Campaign would not have been as successful as it was, were it not for Calata and Xuma's patient organisational work that preceded it. This was a period of both rupture and continuities.

In the 1950s membership of the ANC rose significantly; it became a mass organisation both in its composition and its approaches (Karis & Carter 1973: 426).

Personal experiences and stories have also highlighted the mood of the period. For example, Vulindlela Welcome Zihlangu (my maternal grandfather) and his comrades

who were *Idela Kufa* routinely took the ‘whites only’ carriage on the train or used the ‘whites only’ entrance in the stores in Cape Town. They paid for it either by arrest or, at times, coming home with open and bleeding wounds from the beatings. The assaults emanated from the police, the station officials or white guards at the entrances, all of whom endorsed both the laws and the violent tactics used by the police.

‘*Bayakusibetha basibulale, bazalise ijеле zabo asibuyi mva*’ (They will have to beat us to death, or fill all their jails, but we are not going back now), the man is said to have muttered to his wife, Dorothy Nomazotsho Zihlangu,<sup>1</sup> as she tended his wounds.

There was something in his eyes, in the eyes of all *Amadela Kufa*. UsekaNomathemba [Vulindlela], spoke of the dangers, knew the dangers and experienced some of them. But this thing in his eyes would not go away, even as he winced from the pain when I tended to the wounds. (pers. comm. Dorothy Zihlangu in the 1980s)

The approach of the ANC and its allies was occasioned by the change in state ideology and practices at the time. While throughout the early twentieth century there were various laws and experiments resulting in land dispossession and the banishment of Africans to the Native Reserves (the so-called Hertzog Acts of 1936 in particular), the level of intensity increased dramatically in the 1950s.

South Africa was going through industrial and economic changes that had an impact on the urban settlement of Africans. Against the backdrop of the Second World War, job opportunities for African men and women increased. Women entered the labour force. The industrial boom had an impact on the housing needs of Africans who were coming to the city. In the face of the war and the resulting need for labour to replace those doing service, the influx control laws were suspended in the Transvaal.

From 1939, the development of new townships was suspended. For women this freeze on building new settlements was particularly hard hitting. Women swelled the ranks of those who protested for housing. They were also found in their multitudes in squatter movements that emerged at the time. The strategy was simple: a group of Africans would appropriate available land and use it for housing. Initially, the Johannesburg City Council responded positively by supplying infrastructure such as water and toilet facilities, planning streets for the area and developing stands for people to use to build houses.

Despite the housing difficulties, women were at an advantage when it came to employment opportunities. The Union government had not extended passes to African women; they could move freely and easily secure jobs in the factories. Given the existing choices at the time, women could decide not to take employment in domestic service, which paid far less than the factories and where the hours and general conditions of employment were not favourable. Women in the factories joined unions since they were not affected by the laws prohibiting pass-bearing people from trade union membership.

While the Johannesburg City Council displayed some measure of flexibility, including suspending the influx control laws, their counterparts in Cape Town went the opposite way. In Cape Town, there was stringent application of the influx control measures,

targeting African women in particular. The city council recruited coloured people and reserved jobs for them. According to Julia Wells:

Cape Town chose simply to eliminate non-wage earning Africans. Preference was given to coloureds. Although passes for women had not yet been instituted, the city authorities fell back on previously unused regulations for residential permits contained in the Natives (Urban Areas) Act. Particularly harsh enforcement began in 1954, when authorities granted almost no permits to women to enter the urban areas unless they were bona fide work seekers. (Wells 1993: 106)

After various measures, experiments and laws had been tested and applied in different ways throughout the earlier period, the 1948 National Party (NP) victory changed things fundamentally. The Population Registration Act of 1952 consolidated all the earlier efforts, and consequently women and men of all races had to carry an identification card. The Native Law Amendment Act of 1952 forced every African woman, man and child to have a special permit to be in an urban area for longer than 72 hours (Wells 1993: 102).

The final nail was the Natives Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act of 1952. This is the law that sealed the fate of Africans, replacing the previous passes for Africans with the new reference document. Both African men and women were forced to carry this document at all times. Emboldened by its electoral victory in 1953, the NP announced its intention to introduce passes to African women from 1956, on a voluntary basis (Wells 1993).

Throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, there had been sporadic and spontaneous acts of resistance by women and men. While women tended to mount larger campaigns against passes, resulting in authorities being wary of African women, men also joined and at times initiated different forms of protest. Women were at the forefront of the Campaign to Defy Unjust Laws. This can be seen in the activities of women described in this chapter.

Corresponding to the dominant state ideology and practices at the time, which with the victory of the NP crystallised into co-ordinated efforts to drive Africans out of the urban areas (the few that were needed for purposes of labour were severely controlled), the black political opposition also took a different tone and texture. When the Bantu Education Act was introduced, many Africans withdrew their children from schools. Women were active in the alternative schools and also in other welfare services that black people (with their white left and white liberal colleagues) were putting in place for the benefit of Africans.

However, it became clear that none of these efforts could work successfully in the context of apartheid. The Campaign to Defy Unjust Laws was the first co-ordinated and national campaign of mass, countrywide scale and content mounted by the Congress Alliance – that is, the ANC together with the South African Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress, the Congress of Democrats and the SA Congress of Trade Unions. As Walter Sisulu explained, the choice of the word 'defy' was used to provide a specific message:

The name ‘defiance’ was deliberately used to make a difference between passive resistance and the defiance campaign. The aim here was to incite the people to action so that they should be militant and no longer fear jail. They must go willingly to jail. That was the aim, to arouse the whole nation. (Sisulu 2001: 76)

It is against this background that women’s resistance to the pass laws in the 1950s needs to be located. Of particular significance, this chapter looks at the manner in which that resistance has been understood, interpreted and written by historians and by feminist historians in particular.

Such a powerful shift in the liberation politics of the day was also manifested in the rise in organisation and the growing direct political involvement of women in the 1950s. Following the 1943 constitution, which changed the status of women in the ANC from auxiliary to full membership, women wanted to build their own organisation and continue with its mass campaigns.

While mass mobilisation was a new phenomenon for the ANC male political leadership, for women it had always been a feature in the anti-pass campaign and other expressions of public political anger. Ginwala comments that women have always organised from a mass base (Ginwala 2006).

The 1950s decade has received much academic attention, with a focus on the anti-pass campaign and the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) in particular. Some scholars have also attempted to look at the relationship between FSAW, an umbrella organisation formed in 1954 which brought together the women’s structures of organisations affiliated to the Congress Alliance – including the Congress of Democrats (COD), the Black Sash, the ANCWL, Women in the Natal/Transvaal Indian Congress – and the broader Congress Alliance.

The intention of this chapter is not to repeat previous accounts of the anti-pass campaign, to narrate the events that led to the historic 1956 march or the details of the march itself, important as these are. That information can be found in a variety of texts, including Baard (1986), Joseph (1986), Walker (1991), Wells (1993), Sisulu (2002), and a host of other academic papers and theses.

Lauretta Ngcobo’s novel *And They Didn’t Die* (1990) also offers deep insights into the women’s mood and uncompromising stance against the introduction of dipping tanks as part of livestock control and the *dompas*<sup>2</sup> in Natal. More than a narrative of the events, Ngcobo’s historical novel also takes us into some of the psycho-sociological dynamics and the militancy of women’s protest. While it is a novel and, as such, takes some creative liberties, *And They Didn’t Die* is based on historic events and goes to a deeper level in its insights than many feminist and historical writings on the subject. Amongst other things, it brings out the personal cost paid by individual women.

Judging by the expansive literature on this period, a student of feminist history may be led to conclude that it is sufficiently documented. However, one must ask what the nature of this scholarship, biographical work and historiography has been. What theoretical tools and conceptual frameworks inform the reading and engagement with this period? What has been their relevance and success in unlocking our collective memory and in

understanding the meanings and the place of women's struggles and organisations in the mass mobilisation of the 1950s? And to what extent do these studies relate to, explain and understand the actual voices, actions, movements and character of the period?

This period, it will be argued, has not been studied in its own terms and for its own significance. The literature is often obscured by interpretations imposed on history and its meanings by a feminist historiography that intends to confirm one school of thought or the other. The theoretical tools deployed have often shown fidelity to a specific ideological framework of particular external origins and this has characterised much of the feminist scholarly work undertaken on the period.

While Walker is correct in saying that to use feminist lenses in looking at the history of women in the 1950s is not to impose a feminist view on the historical material (Walker 1991), I am concerned here not with the asking of questions *per se*, but rather with which questions are asked, what frames them and how they are answered. To some extent, this is in agreement with Walker's assertion that 'what makes research feminist is the type of questions one is asking...as well as careful attention to gender stratification and sexual division of labour in one's analysis of social relations and hierarchies' (1991: xxiii).

In this chapter, I demonstrate the inadequacy of the above approach, I argue that the feminisms prevailing in South Africa, and elsewhere, require a much deeper and more complex understanding than the one given above. While I am in agreement with Walker on the complexities of a 'global sisterhood' and the limitations of these assumptions (Walker 1991: xxiv), the limitations still prevail. However, this chapter attempts to unpack the very tools of analysis and the conceptual framework applied, not only in the earlier feminist engagement with the 1950s women's organisation, but also in the most contemporary work.

To illustrate this contentious matter, I want to look at a few significant issues in the 1950s. The first is the formation of FSAW, the second is the language of FSAW and its activists, and the third is the manner in which writers, especially Walker (1991) and Wells (1993), have written about this period. Although not writing about this period as such, Hassim et al. (1987) are also a critical point of reference, particularly in their analysis of the relationship between the national liberation struggle and women's liberation (including a feminist analysis of the latter).

Walter Sisulu's definition of the Defiance Campaign and its intentions and spirit resonates with the approach taken by women in the 1950s. However, it must be borne in mind that while Sisulu saw imprisonment as something that the defiers of death had to prepare for, many South African women had already tested this difficult terrain.

## FSAW: some reflection

While women were acting alone in some aspects of their campaigns, it was often within the overall context of the ethos of defiance that characterised much of the decade.

Given the experiences of African women in Cape Town, especially overcrowding and the resultant exploitation of tenants by those who rented out rooms, it is not

surprising that Cape Town women were amongst those who led the call for a conference to fight for women's rights and for full economic citizenship. The conference took place in Johannesburg on 17 April 1954. About 150 delegates from all over the country attended (Zihlangu Papers).

This conference became a platform where women from all over the country and from different racial groups came together to share experiences and to map a way forward. The conference resolved to form FSAW and adopted a Women's Charter. Wells writes:

They also passed resolutions condemning the Natives Resettlement Bill, the Natives Land and Amendment Bill, the Bantu Education Act, the Separate Representation of Voters Act and the practice of using male pass law offenders as farm labour – in other words a solid rejection of all apartheid legislation. (Wells 1993: 107)

The details of women's contributions at this conference give the texture and a deeper understanding of African women's daily lives during that period. Louisa Metwana reported:

The raids create anxiety in many households and children are not spared from witnessing ill treatment of their parents. They see the powerlessness of their fathers and the indignities they suffer as a result of the inspection of men's income. Within a few minutes of inspection, a family could be literally ejected into the streets should the man's income be deemed not high enough to cover the rent...this can happen in the dead of the night, in the early hours of the morning...while it is still dark outside, the family is thrown out, their belongings scattered in the street. (Zihlangu Papers)

Florence Matomela shared the experiences and responses of women in Port Elizabeth:

They can kick the door open any time during the night. The father, mother, children and everyone else in the household had to produce their papers. Fed up of this treatment, we collected our resident permits and returned them to the local authorities. This was our protest against the raids. Give them their papers, so they do not have to come and bother us, they can just look through the documents in their keeping if they want to know anything about us and our families...That was the reasoning behind our campaign of handing over the papers...here keep your papers and let us sleep peacefully...Obviously this created more trouble for us. The raids continued, the harassment did not stop. But we had done something for ourselves. (Zihlangu Papers)

Amongst the clauses of the Women's Charter are two that I want to highlight because they speak directly to the issues raised in this chapter. Identifying obstacles to women's progress, the Charter stated:

The law has lagged behind the development of society; it no longer corresponds to the actual social and economic position of women. The law has become an

obstacle to the progress of women and therefore a brake on the whole society. This intolerable condition would not be allowed to continue were it not for the refusal of large sections of our menfolk to concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves.

We shall teach the men they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and practice. (FSAW, Women's Charter, April 1954)

## FSAW: the language, thinking and approaches

The very conference where the formation of FSAW was decided is instructive. It called on women 'to fight for women's rights and for the full economic citizenship of all'. This put FSAW right in the centre of political struggles in the mid-1950s.

The narratives from women who shared their experiences and struggles in their communities also give an indication of the political thought processes that informed women's actions. It is therefore important to look at the characterisation used by Wells in describing the women's struggles of the period and to examine her statements against what we now know to have happened. Wells writes:

The tradition of women's energetic struggles in the past has been held up as inspiration and motivation for subsequent generations in their attempt to overthrow apartheid. On the other hand, under closer scrutiny a powerful conservative element emerges as the driving force of these movements. While the women effectively resisted oppression from a ruthlessly coercive state, they were at the same time defending the primacy of their roles as mothers and homemakers. Racial oppression was tackled while traditional gender-defined roles were reinforced. (Wells 1993: 1)

Similarly, even though Walker demonstrates a remarkable shift (and growth) from her earlier position in the first edition of *Women and Resistance* (1982), the preface to the 1991 edition is still riddled with remnants of her earlier arguments:

Today I would wish to look more carefully at the assumption that women's defence of their maternal roles constituted a negation of their rights as women – that women's rights somehow is at odds with the maternal role – and that organisation around the latter is evidence of an unproblematic conservatism and defence of patriarchy. (Walker 1991: xx)

Interestingly, despite a number of qualifiers and a substantive reconsideration as seen in the above quote, the dominant characterisation remains and shows the need to unpack these analytical tools and their framework:

For most members it was their blackness rather than their femaleness that ultimately determined their political practice – although the power of the anti-pass campaign to mobilise women undoubtedly lay in its fusion of those two elemental strands of African women's identity around a single issue. And much of the FSAW programme was directed at women in their role as mothers...

Inasmuch as discrimination against women was looked at it was often as the barrier to women's full participation in the national struggle – i.e. as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Very few FSAW members would have described themselves as feminists and the formal commitment to women's emancipation was overshadowed by practices and ideas that could only be described as patriarchal...

Women's struggles against domination were always subordinated to the claims of national liberation. Women's struggles against male domination, whether in their families or political life, were for the most part private and riddled with ambiguity. Few have acknowledged them as 'political'. (Walker 1991: xiv)

This analytical approach is also evident in Walker's evaluation of the ANC National Executive Committee statement of May 2, 1990. It appears there is no escaping the either/or approach and the juxtaposition of the national liberation struggle and women's emancipation (Walker 1991).

This is at the centre of my argument against the limitations and deeply flawed approach employed by writers like Walker and Wells, amongst others. Why the Berlin Wall between blackness and liberation struggle on the one hand and feminism on the other? In 'Shouldn't we change the subject?' (Volbrecht & Gasa 1997) similar questions are raised which touch on the need for the connection between all forms of oppression experienced by women. Why should women look to the national liberation struggle for their emancipation in the first place, as suggested by Walker (1991) and Hassim et al. (1987)?

These are the kinds of binaries that are completely unnecessary and do not make sense of black women's experiences. For one, the defence of the home and women's role as homemaker does not automatically mean defence of all practices that may occur within the home, including experiences of abuse. In reality, women's lives are shaped by constant negotiation and self-redefinition within and outside the patriarchal system. But at the heart of the earlier struggles is the fact that African women were homeless by state design. They were defined by the economic and political activity of the dominant ethos and practices at the time. Their struggle against the pass laws, which were a tangible way of infringing their rights, was, in fact, a struggle to be in the public domain at the same time as it was a struggle for free movement.

Why is the defence of the family seen as deeply conservative? Is this taking the context into account? Young children of school-going age, who were harassed and raided for resident permits, were these women's children. How does feminism clash with the protection of one's children? Why does it have to?

Walker writes, 'Very few FSAW members would have described themselves as feminists' (1991: xiv). 'So what?' is the question that immediately springs to my mind. It is instructive that Walker described Ray Alexander Simons as a 'committed feminist' (1991: xvii) while exiling Dora Tamana from this description. This, in my view, is imposing a political identity/label. Those who are familiar with the work of Ray Alexander Simons, as I am sure Walker is, will agree that, while she put forward arguments for women's emancipation in her work, she always connected this to the broader struggle. I am not sure whether Alexander Simons herself would have used the label 'feminist' in the same way Walker suggests.

Reading *Class and Colour* (Simons & Simons 1983) and *All my Life and all my Strength* (Alexander Simons 2004), one is at pains to find a feminist analysis of the sort Walker would want. The mere fact that Alexander Simons's seminal work, penned with her husband Jack, is called *Class and Colour*, with gender left out, suggests an interesting choice of emphasis. It is a choice that I believe is indicative of its time, for both authors had a deep consciousness of the nature of women's oppression.

What and who is a feminist? This is a question that remains as important today as it was when Walker's (1991) *Women and Resistance* was first published in 1982. Important as this question is, this chapter has a different preoccupation – tracing the development of the political consciousness of South African women of the 1950s. I suggest that the manner in which the subject has been looked at has failed to place South African women in the discourse of feminisms. Like her comrades in FSAW, including Tamana, Alexander Simons had a different take from that of some of the leading feminist academics. This is eloquently captured by hooks:

We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of oppression, that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice. (hooks 1989: 21)

It is also important to address another aspect of Walker's statement quoted earlier:

Women's struggles against male domination, whether in their families, workplace or political life, were for the most part private and riddled with ambiguity. Few would have acknowledged them as 'political'. These were 'struggles without a name', to adopt the phrase used by Betty Friedan to describe the roots of the contemporary women's movement in the United States. (Walker 1991: xiv)

However, for those who have studied FSAW and even the earlier struggles, there is evidence to the contrary. From their first entry into the political space, women resisted male domination, acting on their own, representing themselves directly to the Union government and even in their appeals to the empire. Chapter 5 of this volume has dealt with some of this. Of relevance here is the relationship between the private and the public spheres.

First, a word must be said about Betty Friedan's analysis and context. There is no doubt that *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was a powerful intervention in its time. However, for African women, the gender struggles in the private domain have never been 'without a name'. There is the now famous statement by Lillian Ngoyi: 'the husbands speak of democracy but do not practise it in the home' (Zihlangu Papers).

The question of speech, articulation and silence has exercised many feminist writers. Both feminist academics and feminist academics who are also activists have cautioned against endorsement of one form of engagement at the expense of the other. They argue that often the response of women is informed by their prevailing conditions and the nature of the patriarchal oppression they are experiencing.

While the importance of speaking out against violence, abuse and oppression and a silencing authority, has been credited as a powerful form of self-liberation, it must be acknowledged that there are multiple forms this can take. It must also be acknowledged that silence, too, can be liberating, an exercise of self-authority and agency. Silence, *when chosen*, can be a powerful force (Motsemme 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

For those women (and men) who were imprisoned, the decision to remain silent in the face of torture, taunting, interrogation and other bullying tactics was often extremely difficult. The decision to choose silence was a means of not only not saying that which was intended to be concealed but, at times, it was also a means of exercising authority, of refusing to be drawn out by the interrogators. The ultimate power, in such an interaction, resides with the one who chooses silence; she or he, by refusing to speak, is defying the powerful at a time when apparently most powerless, thus changing the balance of power. Also, silence may be chosen in order to conserve energy for survival. In this case, it may be argued that one is not silenced *per se*, but has *chosen silence*.

'What did you tell them?' was the question most activists heard when they came out of jail. 'Nothing,' would be the triumphant answer. Nothing was not really *nothing*, as in an absence of words. Often it could be a little and harmless revelation, a morsel given tantalisingly to the torturer to ease the pressure of torture. However, most importantly, below the surface lay a powerful, unspoken understanding between the torturer and the tortured: 'I hold the key to what you want.' Here, the interaction went far beyond what has often been looked at – the anxiety about betraying others. Here, the choice of silence (on some issues or even choosing what to tell) was an exercise of personal power and control; a fighting back with a weapon that lay way beyond the reach of the one who presumably held the power.

'What will I say?' was the question most activists asked themselves as they imagined and prepared themselves for the day they were arrested. Often they selected what to say, what information to give when they could no longer endure the pressure of torture. Silence/speech is a very complex realm into which feminists have just begun to delve. Many African feminists are familiar with this choice. '*Hayi ndikheth'ukuthula* (I choose silence)', they say, when words simply cannot carry the burden of their emotions or when they see that their words are carried away by the wind (*utheth'elemoyeni* or *uthethel'lilize*).

One recalls the defiant tilting of the head, the faraway look and deep concentration as women in rural Eastern Cape literally dragged smoke from the long pipe, their backs held straight against the wall, their legs stretched out and extended in front of them. When these women say, '*Andinawo amazwi okuthetha nawe* (I have no words for you)', it is often not indicative of a shortage of words, but rather a decision not to exchange on a particular subject.

Looking at another cultural context and power dynamic in the speech/silence discourse within the feminist movement, hooks writes:

Within feminist circles, silence is often seen as the sexist 'right speech of womanhood' – the sign of woman's submission to patriarchal authority...This emphasis may be accurate remembering of what has taken place in the households of women from WASP backgrounds in the United States. But in black communities (and diverse ethnic communities), women have not been silent. Their voices can be heard. Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard...Our speech, the 'right speech of womanhood', was often soliloquy, the talking to thin air, the talking to ears that do not hear you – the talk that is simply not listened to. Unlike the black male preacher, whose speech was to be heard, listened to, whose words were to be remembered, the voices of black women...giving orders, making threats, fussing – could be tuned out, could become a kind of background music audible but not acknowledged as significant speech. (hooks 1989: 6)

I argue that the issue is not silence or speech but rather how the silencing takes place, its process and form. It follows, therefore, that we must also acknowledge the different forms of self-representation, the choices that are made available to women. Awareness of such nuances is of critical importance to feminist academia and feminist academic activisms, not only to make women's voices heard and listened to but also ensure that our areas of emphasis do not reproduce the patterns of inequality within feminist circles.

It is not insignificant that Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) is silent on the specifics of black or ethnic minorities' experiences in the United States. Such cleavages continue to exist, not only in the United States but also in many parts of the globe, including South Africa.

Indeed, black South African women were not silent in the 1950s; they were very articulate, not only on the question of passes but also on cultural practices that discriminated against women. In the Women's Charter they resolved to:

struggle for the removal of laws and customs that deny African women the right to own, or inherit land...work for change in the laws of marriage such as are found amongst our African, Malay and Indian people, which have the effect of placing wives in the position of legal subjugation to, and giving husbands the power to dispose of wives' property and earnings and to dictate to them on all matters affecting them and their children... (Zihlangu Papers)

From the 1954 conference onwards, FSAW began its activities. When pass raids intensified in the period shortly after the conference, FSAW kept busy with its door-to-door campaign against the passes. They urged all Congress Alliance structures to start working against the pass laws for men (Wells 1993).

In preparation for the Congress of the People to be held in 1955, FSAW members went out to factories and worked together with *amavolontiya* (volunteers) who went around the country collecting demands to be included in the Freedom Charter at the pending Congress. Teams of women went to different parts of the country, talking to people, preparing for the congress. During these preparations, the Transvaal FSAW held a special conference for women on 8 March 1955 to hear women's demands. They were presented to the Congress of the People on 26 June 1955, the day the Freedom Charter was adopted. The women's demands – which were similar to those in the Women's Charter – were read out by Helen Joseph and Josie Palmer.

## The first march: October 1955

In August 1955, a follow-up meeting was called by the Transvaal FSAW to popularise the Freedom Charter. However, matters took a different turn. Women talked of the worsening conditions and unrelenting harassment by police and local authorities. There was a permanent housing shortage crisis, with 'people on the waiting list forever', according to one speaker. There was evidence that those who lived in Sophiatown were being hounded out of their homes. Stories told of city officials who tore off their roofs, destroyed their backyards and harassed people relentlessly (Wells 1993).

Women decided to take drastic measures. News of a march planned by the then newly formed Black Sash at the Union Buildings, to protest against the proposed constitutional amendments, served as an inspiration to women. FSAW then worked with some allies in the Congress Alliance to organise the march.

The government tried its best to undermine the march. Large gatherings were banned. Other efforts to undermine the march were efforts to block sale of tickets to Pretoria by the agents of Putco bus company. Despite these efforts, it would appear the government had a knack of undermining its own efforts – a week before the march, the government announced its decision to issue passes to African women from the beginning of 1956. Thus, on 27 October 1955 a crowd of 2 000 filled the amphitheatre at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. They chose delegates from the four racial groups – African, Coloured, Indian and white – to present the petitions to government officers. When the delegates arrived, the body of women broke into song. They then left. The feared attack from the police did not take place, not that the women who had gathered in Pretoria seemed to have given this much thought. By now, the women were really angry. Returning home triumphantly, they resolved not to rest until the matter of the passes had been thoroughly buried.

## *Wathint'abafazi Wathint'imbokodo, Uzokufa*

*Ndababona bephuma/Ndababona bephuma...*

*Ndasondela ndabuza, niphuma phina ningabaphina?*

*Bedlula bengumngcelele.*

*Besel'imibethe ngezandla, bevuka kusasa neentaka*

*Yiva phula-phula, nokunyathela komkhos'omkhulu*

*Yiva betsholoza, bevuma becul'ezongoma...*

*Bedlula bengumngcelele.*

(From *uMkholisi weMithika*, thought to be by B. Tyamzashe<sup>3</sup>)

I saw them come out, I saw them come out...

I came closer and asked, whence do you come?

They passed in single file.

They drank dew with their own hands, with birds they awoke

Oh come hear the footsteps of the great march

Oh hear the melody, singing their songs...

They passed in single file.

The narratives of the women's march to Pretoria in 1956 conjure powerful images. Many have written of this as the great march, signifying its importance not only in the history of women's resistance against the pass laws but also in the history of the liberation struggle itself.

Given the importance of the march, there are broadly two tendencies in telling the story of the event. One is the description of the great crowd of women, 20 000 having secured about 100 000 signatures – women who dared to go where no one had gone before. The sheer size of the march and the spirit of the women – women from different backgrounds and social strata (some had gone without even informing their husbands of where they were going, for fear of being stopped or exposing the men to danger) – make the march larger than life in the collective narrative psyche of feminist activists in South Africa. *Yho!* Where did they get the guts? It is not very hard, though, to imagine how a woman who has never been outside of her village could have decided to travel to so far a place. By then, no doubt, Pretoria and the passes had occupied an important place in the consciousness of South African women, especially African women.

The second response, perhaps overwhelmed by the symbolism of the march, tends to look at what it is that women achieved in that march. Given that passes were finally introduced later, it is easy to see how those who feel let down by this march can in fact end up being dismissive of it. There is a tendency to take the march and subject it to a blow-by-blow feminist analysis and impose meanings that were never intended by those women of 1956, and then judge it as having failed.

In between these two ways of looking at the march, there are, however, multiple other ways which can help us understand not only the significance of the march but the

very struggles which led to it. Its significance lies in what it achieved: bringing together women from such diverse backgrounds, and registering women's objections as women (and on so large a scale) to the encroachment of the state on all aspects of African women's lives.

The march is significant also for the manner in which it was organised, by women of different races, ideological backgrounds and social strata. There were Communist women, churchwomen, trade unionists, African nationalists, the peasantry, the upper middle class of black and white South Africa, rubbing shoulders, brought together by a common cause – the demands of women to have the passes removed. African women were not going to carry them. To these women, this was clear and non-negotiable.

But we cannot examine the importance of the march if we do not look at the women who got there in the first place. Not the actual journey, defying and tricking a government that had even stopped trains on some routes. That is remarkable in and of itself. But the journey began long before that – the march was the culmination of almost a year of preparations to get women to Pretoria. It was also a brave, heroic and powerful way of closing a struggle against passes which began perhaps long before some of the leaders of this march were born.

It is here, in this complex area of negotiation between women and the men in the Congress Alliance, in the negotiations between women themselves, in the different ways in which women outwitted both their husbands and the state, some sacrificing their last pennies and precious jewels to make it to Pretoria, that the complexities and nuances of the meanings of the march can be understood. It is also in understanding the dynamic connections between all of the above and more, in reading the march for its own importance and significance, that we can enrich our understanding of women's political history. These relationships, contestations and dynamics challenge the way in which we have understood feminisms, motherisms, patriarchies and women's voices and voicing in South Africa.

### **Preparations for the 1956 march**

Following the October 1955 march, when 2 000 women gathered in Pretoria, the ANCWL held its first annual conference on 14 December 1955 in Johannesburg. Both the ANCWL and FSAW decided to intensify the campaign against the passes, whose introduction early in the following year the government had earlier announced. A national working committee was set up to co-ordinate preparations for the campaign.

Organisers of the ANCWL, the COD, the Coloured People's Congress, FSAW, the Black Sash and other affiliated organisations worked around the clock. The intensity of those months is aptly captured in Joseph's (1986) autobiography, where she writes about traversing the townships in the Johannesburg area with Bertha Mashaba.

On 11 March 1956, the Transvaal FSAW held a Women's Day meeting. Once again, women used this platform as an opportunity to share their concerns. In that meeting, women agreed to have smaller peaceful campaigns targeting all local Native commis-

sioners, in order to register women's objection to the pass laws in general and to stop the introduction of reference books to African women. The meeting also decided to have a major campaign, a march to Pretoria on 9 August of that year. The march was envisaged and planned along the same lines as the one in October 1955, only this time it would be on a national and therefore much larger scale.

Following the meeting, women worked tirelessly to prepare for the march. The Transvaal group was well organised in its network. In the Eastern Cape, women held fundraising activities, including selling scones and cupcakes to enable women to travel to Pretoria.

Once again, the government tried its best to frustrate the efforts of the women and to undermine the campaign. Some of the key activists, including Ray Alexander Simons, were either banned or their movements were severely curtailed. However, as Alexander Simons revealed later, women were very resourceful. 'I used to sneak to Langa township, hold meetings in unexpected places in disguise and our preparations continued' (interview with Alexander Simons, 1995). However, resourceful as they were, things proved difficult in the Cape, according to Dora Tamana (cited in Wells 1993). In the Transvaal, things were much more under control. Joseph, Ngoyi and Mashaba were amongst the main organisers there (see Joseph 1986).

No matter how hard the state worked to frustrate women, its very actions provided women with ammunition and its timing was simply wonderful, according to Ray Alexander (Interview with Alexander Simons, 1995). The proclamation of the Group Areas Act for Johannesburg was one such example. Sophiatown was marked as a place for whites. Now, even formal residents, not just squatters and backyard tenants, were to be affected by government policies.

### **Waphuma ngefestil'uStrijdom**

The weight of resistance has been greatly increased in the last few years by the emergence of our women. It may even be true that, had the women hung back, resistance would still be faltering and uncertain...Furthermore, women of all races had far less hesitation than men in making common cause about things basic to them. (Luthuli 1962)

As preparations got under way and the day was getting closer, the male leadership of the ANC expressed its concerns. Joseph narrates the story of Ngoyi and others who were summoned to appear in front of the leadership, where they were asked, 'Are you aware of what you are doing? And what will happen if the leaders get arrested? Have you considered the dangers you are exposing the women to?'

Ngoyi's simple response – 'Yes we know what we are doing. We trust the women' – reveals not only the stealth of the women but also their fearless determination. Of course, as many would admit later, none of the women really knew the amount of work this would involve (Joseph 1986: 12).

It was clear that the male leadership had more than just anxiety about the possibilities of violence, arrest and other unforeseen tragedies and traps. They had serious reservations about women undertaking such a huge campaign on their own. Given the tense political atmosphere following the first years of the apartheid government, severe repression was not a remote possibility and, as it turned out, those who feared this response were proven correct; it was only a matter of time.

The 1950s women in the ANCWL did not consider it wise to enter into bitter exchanges with their leadership in the ANC and the Congress Alliance in general. True, despite trying smaller campaigns, they had no experience with this level of organisation. Besides, below the surface, ideological and patriarchal reasoning simmered. Women chose not to interact with these issues (analysis based on interview with Alexander [Simons], 1995).

For the women, the key task was getting to Pretoria. So, after telling the Congress leaders that they knew what they were doing, the women continued with their work. From time to time, these interactions with the male leaders would take place and women always answered in the same way, 'We trust the women.'

It was trust that proved to be entirely justified. Women turned out in their thousands on that day. Some travelled from afar – from the Cape, the Free State, Natal, and the northern parts of the country. Despite the cancellation of trains on some routes and buses that did not turn up, women made plans and got to Pretoria. Many were turned back or frustrated because of the transport.

On 9 August 1956, 20 000 women gathered at the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings. These were domestic workers who came with their employers' babies; seven of them were noticed on the backs of the women (Ntantala-Jordan 2006). 'Twenty thousand women in 1956 travelled to Pretoria to tell the white men they were fed up with the passes' (pers. comm. with Dorothy Nomazotsho Zihlangu in the 1980s). She would repeat the number slowly to me, holding up her ten fingers and flashing them twice, as if even 30 years after the march she had not lost her sense of wonderment at what women had achieved.

The women came in all manner of dress. There were those in green and black, the uniform of the ANCWL; in various blouses with black skirts and *iziphece* (wide collars/'clubs'<sup>4</sup>) of various denominations; in bright saris; women who were dressed in their Sunday best; and those who simply came in their ordinary, everyday clothes.

Lillian Ngoyi, one of the leaders of the march, led the representatives of all races to the office of Prime Minister Strijdom. According to Wells:

She caught sight of her own daughter crying and thought it might be the last time they saw one another. A barrage of photographers met the delegation inside and pointed women to the right door. When Ngoyi knocked, a voice from behind the door told her she had been sent a letter saying she was prohibited from coming there. She answered, 'The women of Africa are outside. They built this place and their husbands died for this.' (Wells 1993: 112)

The women then went into the office and left the petitions there. They then returned to the crowd, slowly making their way down the steps. Women waited at the amphitheatre to hear what had happened. When the leaders arrived, they called out '*iAfrika!*' three times and the women responded, '*Mayibuye!*'

There was silence. For thirty minutes. The clock which struck three and then quarter past, it was the only sound. (Joseph 1986: 2)

Ngoyi then declared, 'Strijdom is too much of a coward to meet with us.' The crowd stood in silence, giving the Congress salute. And then she led the women in song, Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika, softly at first and then the song rose louder and louder filling the place with women's voices.

After singing Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika the women called out, '*Wathint'bafazi, wathint'imbokodo. Strijdom uzakufa*' (You touch the women, you touch the rock [dislodge a boulder]. Strijdom you will die); '*Malibongwe! Igama lamakhosikazi*' (Let the name of the women be praised).

The song uMkhosi weMithika, although believed to have been composed to mark another incident in black resistance in South Africa, the Bulhoek Massacre, conjures up the image of this crowd of women. The level of fearlessness and self-sacrifice is best captured by the symbolism in the song of those 'who drank dew with their own hands' and rose 'with birds'.

In the struggle parlance, *Waphuma ngefestil'uStrijdom* has been passed down to generations of women through the oral tradition, and composed into song in the 1980s.

Having registered their objections and left their petitions, the women returned in the same orderly manner as they had arrived.

## **The aftermath**

The petitions signed by women were later to be used as part of the evidence in the Treason Trial. Also, immediately after the march, women were specifically targeted by the police and arrested for what seemed to be petty transgressions. Lillian Ngoyi was arrested for being in Moroka Emergency Camp without a permit. ANCWL and FSAW office bearers were amongst the 156 charged with treason.

The march managed to delay the extension of passes to African women. As was typical of the state's relations with women at the time, the state would backtrack a little and then still slowly press ahead with their laws. So, in the final analysis, the march did not stop the introduction of the passes. But the power of the march was far-reaching.

The women who were arrested refused to pay fines. A complex battle between women's leadership and the male leaders of the Congress Alliance ensued. Women did not want to back down. Later, after incidents of no minor confrontation between women and the Congress leaders, the fines were paid, especially by the leaders of the Congress on behalf of women who had been arrested for refusing to carry the pass (interview with Alexander [Simons], 1995).

## Feminisms, motherisms and patriarchies in the women's struggle

hooks makes an instructive point in relation to race, gender and class:

Concurrently, they [black women] know that males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed; knowing that men in their social groups do not have social, political and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status. While they are aware that sexism enables men in their respective groups to have privileges denied them, they are more likely to see exaggerated expressions of male chauvinism among their peers as stemming from the male sense of himself as powerless and ineffectual in relation to ruling male groups. (hooks 1981: 18)

The issue is not whether women's oppression exists. We know that the answer to that is that it does. We live with sexism and patriarchy every day and it takes different manifestations, just as we live with racism and experience its different manifestations in different contexts. The same can be said for homophobia. The question, however, is how we understand the liberatory political practice and process in the South African context. How possible was it for a black woman to imagine being free as a woman but oppressed as part of a racial community? Which part of the self would be free and which part would identify with the racial oppression? How do we divide the body – left/right, upper/lower?

Also, women of the 1950s and other generations that followed, did in fact have a much deeper conceptual understanding of race, gender, national liberation and other issues of social location and context than has been credited in feminist historiography. These have often become sharper in the ways in which women engaged both the apartheid state and the male dominated Congress Alliance. For example, the differences over the issue of fines for refusing to carry passes lie at the heart of the difference between women leaders and the male leadership of the Congress Alliance. Few academics have explored the nature and meanings of these differences.

Clearly, far from being submissive, the women of the 1950s had clarity of vision and thought and knew what they wanted and they got there. For example, it is of significance that women chose not to enter into major arguments with the Congress Alliance men before the march. They needed their support. And this they got, despite the reservations expressed by some men, partly because the men did not appreciate the scale of what the women had been planning.

It is also significant that women decided to strike out on their own in 1956, organised across racial lines. The multiracial character of the march is something that is often taken for granted. However, the very idea of the march itself was first raised by Margaret Gazo in relation to the white women's initiative in the Black Sash. 'White women did not invite us to their march...we must have our own march, invite white

women and march side by side, as women of this country...' (Zihlangu Papers) And thus women went to Pretoria, firmly putting themselves on the political stage during one of the most difficult decades in South Africa. They went to Pretoria despite the obstacles placed in their way.

They had come face to face with the different forms of patriarchy and they were not about to acquiesce without a fight. They simply defied both the government and the Congress male leaders. They adopted attitudes appropriate to whomever they were dealing with at a particular point in time.

A closer study of the march to Pretoria and other forms of resistance in other places afterwards, reveals the complex relationship between women and the male leadership, and amongst women themselves. Were they feminist? They probably would answer, 'And what is that?' This point is well captured by Joseph's (1986) choice of title, *Side by Side*, which is a line from the Women's Charter. It was also a slogan in the 1950s. It became a song in the 1970s and 1980s: 'Side by side, women of the world / side by side, fight for freedom / side by side, fight for freedom now' (sung by Amandla, the choral group of the ANC in exile). In the context of the song, 'side by side' refers both to women of all creeds, classes and colours, calling on them to fight side by side against common oppression. Side by side also refers to the position of women in relation to the national liberation struggle. 'Side by side, together with our menfolk, we will fight for freedom,' said the women of the 1950s.

It was not an easy alliance by any estimation. But it is also important to acknowledge the extent to which these women, conservative or not, cannot be characterised only on the basis of the defence of their homes and children. Nor can they be characterised only on the basis of their stand in relation to the national liberation struggle.

Despite the points of critical importance raised by Hassim et al. (1987), Walker (1991), Wells (1993) and a number of other scholars on the relationship between the national liberation struggle and women's struggle, it is an argument which in my view is based on a false dichotomy. Hassim et al. (1987) write:

The debate around women's oppression in South Africa has become artificially and unnecessarily polarised between those who see the emancipation of women as being secondary to and contingent upon the national liberation and those who separate women's emancipation from broader concerns.

And then they continue to state:

This is not to say, however, that we agree with the dominant position in South Africa which sees women's struggle as necessarily subsumed under national struggles. This position sees 'Western bourgeois feminism' as being hardly relevant to the lives of black women in South Africa. It defines the apartheid order as being the prime enemy and its abolition as the major political task. The position argues women are drawn into organisation on the basis of their opposition to racism in its various forms. Hence they seem to have 'communal' interest with men. (1987: 5)

The most revealing aspect in the argument by Hassim et al. is how it proceeds to produce the very same binary approach it earlier declared as ‘artificial’ and ‘unnecessary’. For many black women, the two positions presented above are simply not choices at all.

There is no question about which aspect of their identities – be it race, class, gender, sexuality, or religion – takes precedence. Of course, it is true that an aspect of one’s identity may be emphasised at a particular point in time, depending on the context in which one finds oneself. This may even be in relation to geographical location, for example, in a northern hemisphere context an African woman may suddenly feel very uncomfortable in the company of other feminists with whom she may share the same feminist vision, principles and even activism. The question is, what mediates that experience at that point in time? Does an African lesbian feminist identify less as a lesbian simply because an African aspect of her identity comes to the fore at a particular moment?

There is a need for a non-linear, nuanced approach that is informed by the understanding that women straddle many positions. Their lives defy the binaries that are dominant in the South African feminist academic ethos. The dominant ethos in fact disarms any attempt to comprehend the complex phenomena it analyses.

Similarly, motherist movements (by this I refer to movements that are shaped by the women’s identity as mothers, which are often women and mother-centred in their political approach) have played important roles in specific contexts. Far from limiting women, these movements may also be a springboard to a broader feminist agenda, although, in some cases, they are powerful in themselves. If we look at the role played by ‘the mothers of the disappeared’ in many Latin American countries during some of the most autocratic military regimes, it becomes clear that motherism, for all its limited focus, can play an important role. It is also obvious that this identity and social role is not a monolith. Issues of location, identity, history and context remain important starting points in feminist historiography and feminist activisms.

### **Anti-pass campaign: Dinokana – a different dimension**

To look at this question of identity and location from another perspective, let us visit very briefly the experience of the Dinokana community in Zeerust. Following the 1956 march, the government decided to press ahead with its extension of passes to African women in a low-key manner.

In 1957 Prime Minister Verwoerd sent a message to Chief Moilwa of Dinokana, ordering him to tell his wife to carry a pass. Chief Moilwa’s response was not the one the government had been prepared to hear: ‘Who the hell is this Verwoerd? I have never heard of him before. Why is the government interfering with other people’s wives?’ (Manson 1983: 64).

This led to a period of serious strife, with the NP government deploying all manner of tactics to depose Chief Moilwa. The women of Dinokana protested and refused to carry passes. They mounted a campaign both in support of their chief and also to protest against the ‘handling of women who fell into the hands of the police’. There was a report that a young woman had been raped when she was arrested for not possessing a pass. (Hooper 1989) Walker offers a somewhat static reading of the Zeerust resistance:

For the most part, opposition to passes was bound up with conservative defence of traditional institutions – chieftainship, the patriarchal family, established sex roles. The women who defied reference book units were not demonstrating consciously for freedom or equality; one of the strongest reasons why women were opposed to passes was that they were seen as a direct threat to the family. (1991: xix)

Could there perhaps be a different understanding? Is it true that defence of family is automatically defence of patriarchal values? Is it not possible that we may have a different interaction between Traditional Leaders and women's interests, even if it is limited to tactical alliances? Can women and men have no common interests that are of mutual benefit?

Paradoxically, Walker seems to be in a contradictory dialogue with herself. Of the very same situation in Zeerust, she writes:

Yet as was true of protests in urban areas as well, the effects of the anti-pass protest in Zeerust on the women involved politicising and radicalising. In organising to resist passes, women were learning new political skills...This pushed women into re-evaluating their own attitudes towards themselves and encouraged a greater feeling of assertiveness and solidarity with other women. (1991: 208–9)

In other words, the Zeerust experience, whose scale and characteristics go beyond that which is dealt with here, was *empowering to the women*. There is no doubt that there are ambiguities surrounding the chief's support of the women's resistance. However, as Walker shows, this campaign offered women an opportunity for direct involvement in political decision-making and for interaction with the chiefs and other male leaders. The significance of this, as well as the potential to change relations between women and men, must not be underestimated in the reading of these alliances, fluid as they may be.

The ambiguity, of course, lies in the fact that the chiefs may also have seen women as their property. But part of our reading must also take into account that whatever their motives or understandings, they stood as a barrier against an attack on African women.

The women were not passive, as it turned out. They were also not as unconscious of the linkage between their anti-pass campaign and freedom as Walker seems to conclude.

## Conclusion

While there may be similarities in patriarchal practices, it is also true that patriarchy takes different forms. There may be numerous ways in which patriarchy is manifested. The response of feminist academics and academic feminist activists therefore must be informed by this consideration.

Recognising the importance of this complexity, many black feminists have been engaging with these different aspects of identity, race, gender, class and location for a while. Patricia Hill Collins has called for black feminist thought which connects itself

with other feminists but also with other forms of oppression (1990).

Walker makes an important point when she argues that those who are situated in the various African cultures are in a better position to understand and engage with the nuances. Although there is nothing wrong with this argument *per se* – yes, black women, as well as women in all other cultures and contexts, must speak for themselves and situate their own struggles in their own contexts – we must be careful of creating another form of ‘othering’. Walker is already engaging with the Zeerust situation, so why not engage fully and with sufficient depth and flexibility in order to understand its fullest implications, including the complexity and nuances?

Yuval-Davis (1997) also makes an important point when she cautions against positioning women as being in a dichotomous relationship to men.

We must probe discourse and ways of *being*, and representation of black women in the dominant feminist ethos. We must simply move beyond our line of vision and areas of comfort and look at the detail, the pattern as well as the big picture.

It is the connection between all these levels that will assist us in understanding our own location, developing tools of analysis that are appropriate to our own situation, and applying these in a way that illustrates and illuminates rather than obscures our real and lived experiences and their multiple meanings.

It must be made clear that I am not suggesting an essentialist approach, either in terms of race, gender, geographical or any socio-historical category. There is nothing wrong with Euro-American and Occidental feminist traditions *per se*. In the same way, there is nothing wrong with or limited about the Arab, Asian or African feminisms.

What must be acknowledged, however, are the different historical and situational realities and that these may call for a different approach and an adjustment of a particular framework. This is not a negation of any feminist tradition, whether it is from the northern or the southern hemisphere.

Our starting point is a search for tools, a fine-combing of historical archives and narratives, a fine-tuning of the ear, and the development of a wider non-linear vision that can read backwards, sideways and at all levels at any given point.

This chapter has located the growing political consciousness amongst women within a broader feminist and historical framework. It has looked at ‘motherism’, used here to refer to a form of identification in which women as mothers is central. As Cesaire puts it, ‘There are two ways to lose oneself: through walled segregation in the particular or through dilution in the universal’ (1955: 6).

It would seem that a revisiting and recontextualisation of the 1950s is warranted, in order to trace its place in South African women’s history of resistance. This may seem obvious. However, we must examine where we put emphasis and what is treated as significant and what is not.

The relationship between the universal and the particular is one with which feminist scholars must continuously engage. Cesaire’s approach is apt in capturing these connections and the dangers of emphasising one at the expense of the other.

## NOTES

- 1 A famous activist honoured posthumously in 2004 by the state president.
- 2 Contemptuous word used by Africans to refer to passes.
- 3 *uMkhosi weMithika* is a choral song believed by this author to refer to the religious procession of AmaSirayeli who, following their prophet, went to the sacred land. This led to the Bulhoek Massacre just outside the small town of Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. Despite talking to musicologists who specialise in this genre, it has been difficult to ascertain the name of the lyricist. However, it is thought to be B. Tyamzashe, one of the Ginsburg Trio.
- 4 'Club' is the word used in most African communities. It is possible that the word is used to refer to the specific guild/*umanyano* and, as such, it is used in a colloquial sense.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander Simons R (2004) *All my life and all my strength*. Johannesburg: STE Publishers.
- Baard F as told to B Schreiner (1986) *My spirit is not banned*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Césaire A (1955/1972) *Discourse on colonialism*. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Friedan B (1963) *The feminine mystique*. London: Penguin Books.
- Ginwala F (2006) Heroines of the struggle. Lillian Ngoyi Memorial Lecture. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 25 August.
- Hassim S, Metelerkamp J & Todes A (1987) A bit on the side? Gender struggles in the politics of transformation in South Africa. *Transformation*, 5: 3–22.
- Hill Collins P (1990) *Black feminist thought*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Hooks B (1981) *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. Boston: South End Press.
- Hooks B (1989) *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston: South End Press.
- Hooper C (1989) *Brief authority*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Joseph H (1986) *Side by side: The autobiography of Helen Joseph*. Johannesburg: AD Donker.
- Karis T & Carter GM (Eds) (1973) *From protest to challenge, a documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882–1964*, vols 1–4. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.
- Luthuli A (1962) *Let my people go*. London: Fontana.
- Manson AH (1983) *The troubles of Chief Abram Moilwa. The Hurutshe resistance of 1954–1958*. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations
- Motsemme N (2004a) The meanings of silence. *Rhodes Journalism Review*, 24: 4–5.
- Motsemme N (2004b) The mute always speak: On women's silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Current Sociology*, 52(5): 909–932.
- Motsemme N (2004c) Post-apartheid gendered subjectivities: (Re)Constructions of race and class among black South African women. Paper presented at Gendered Worlds: Gains and Challenges: 8th International Interdisciplinary Conference on Women, Makerere University, 22–24 July.
- Ngcobo L (1990) *And they didn't die*: A novel. Durban: University of Natal Press.
- Ntantala-Jordan P (2006) Black women intellectuals in women's resistance politics. Public Lecture, Public Intellectual Series. Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Simons J & Simons R (1983) *Class and colour in South Africa 1850–1950*. London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa. (Original work published 1969)
- Sisulu E (2002) *Walter & Albertina Sisulu: In our lifetime*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Sisulu W (2001) *I will go singing: Walter Sisulu speaks of his life and struggle for freedom in South Africa* (in conversation with GM Houser and H Shore). Cape Town: Robben Island Museum.
- Volbrecht G & Gasa N (1997) Shouldn't we change the subject? Understanding race, class and gender in South Africa. Unpublished manuscript.
- Walker C (1991) *Women and resistance in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip (First published 1982, London: Onyx Press).
- Wells J (1993) *We now demand! The history of women's resistance to pass laws in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Yuval-Davis N (1997) *Gender and nation*. California: Sage.

## PERSONAL ARCHIVES

Zihlangu Papers: documents collected by Dorothea Nomazotsho Zihlangu (property of the author)

# Women in the ANC-led underground

RAYMOND SUTTNER

The involvement of women in liberation struggles tends to attract controversy. This relates mainly to the extent and character of women's participation. Some suggest that their activity merely replicated existing patriarchal relations or that women performed unimportant roles, while the men were cast as heroes. Much of this controversy relates to how one theorises the relationship between feminism and national liberation, in particular whether there is one feminism or whether we are speaking of feminisms and patriarchy or patriarchies.

Although the focus of this chapter is on underground activities, it does relate to these problematic areas in the specific way in which they are manifested within the period of underground organisation in South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

## **What is the understanding of the scope of underground?**

The notion of underground activities with which this chapter works includes both political and military activities. Its focus is not on any one geographical space, even though the ultimate goals may have related purely to South Africa. Although a particular underground activity may have been performed in Johannesburg, the underground phenomenon needs to be traced also to earlier phases of training, preparation, planning, logistics, reconnaissance and other forms of support.

In operating with such a definition one finds an interface with what may conventionally be treated as distinct phenomena in the 'exile period', where the preparatory phases may have taken place. Even the prison experience may legitimately be considered part of the focus of underground in certain circumstances, insofar as some people were trained in prison.

In this specific study the evidence does not relate to imprisonment, largely because the prison experiences of women were on a smaller scale – they mainly served short sentences, in small groups, compared with the Robben Island situation. This, as was the

case with white male and black women prisoners, was less conducive to the establishment of extensive political machinery that could impact beyond the prison (see Buntman 2003).

Another distinction that needs to be drawn is between formal and informal underground networks. There are very many people who constituted themselves as ANC underground units without any contact being made with the organisation. Often such contact would not have been possible in the situation that prevailed. Such people saw how Molotov cocktails were made in illegal publications, and threw these at apartheid targets, or created their own pamphlets or painted slogans on walls.

It is true that, especially where violence was used, it could often drift into gangsterism performed in the name of the ANC, but it is a reality that formally joining the ANC was not a feasible option for most people. How should they have made contact, who should they have trusted? In consequence, there was this phenomenon of people constituting themselves as ANC. Such self-constituted groups were not restricted to the urban areas but also found in the former Transkei (Gasa interview). It is a pattern that existed before the onset of illegality, because many people have always considered themselves ANC or members without ever filling in a form or paying a membership fee. Chief Albert Luthuli, for example, was not a member of the ANC when he was elected Natal president. ANC membership was as much a cultural as a political phenomenon.

One result is that one cannot realistically attempt any quantification of underground work. We do not know how many people were involved, especially if one adopts a wide definition incorporating contributions in various phases and in a number of ways to the execution of an underground activity.

## Sources

There is a small literature related to underground activity in South Africa in general, and very little on the role of women. Jacklyn Cock produced pioneering work on women in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in her *Colonels and Cadres* (1991). Experiences of women in underground activities have been recorded in autobiographies (eg. Jaffer 2003; Middleton 1998), in Hilda Bernstein's interviews on the exile experience (Bernstein 1994), and in unpublished MA and BA honours theses, the latter generally being hard to obtain because they are not always housed in the libraries of the universities where they were produced (but see von den Steinen 1999).

In this study, financial resources and time constraints have meant that choices have had to be made in terms of the sources that are prioritised. Archival resources, while consulted in a limited way, have not been the primary basis for this work. While it is recognised that these could yield important results, material is located in many parts of the country. These resources are not all well organised and back-up from staff is sometimes very limited and unreliable. At the same time, travelling to such locations entails high costs.

In any event, documentation tends to relate only to those who are known to have worked underground (apart from underground reports to the ANC and the South African Communist Party [SACP] that are thus far not available in the archives consulted – and even these relate to underground activities *formally connected* to outside ‘handlers’ and not to those falling within the wider definition provided earlier).

There are large numbers of people who may die without anyone knowing that they were underground operatives. There is no document that tells of their contribution. There are those who quietly assisted or performed various acts. Even if there were not the constraints mentioned, the results yielded from oral work tend to be much greater and more rounded than documentation, though ideally both should be thoroughly canvassed and used to verify and enrich one another.

This greater utility of oral evidence is because of the largely unknown character of the phenomenon and the limitations of the focus of available documentation. The unknown relates to both the quantitative element – how many people were involved – and the qualitative – what was entailed in the experiences.

## Methodology and location/persona

Although the reliance on oral history as a primary source in this chapter is necessary, for the reasons outlined, I have tried to be self-conscious about the conditions of the interviews and the impact that my persona may have had on the interview process.

In the first place, I am a white man seeking information from or about mainly black women. It may well be that there are experiences that women may be prepared to reveal to other women but may have withheld from me. I have not tried to probe into areas that may be embarrassing to the individuals concerned. For example, in one case, a person indicated very clearly that she did not want to discuss torture. I did not specifically want to do that but my impression was that the experience might have entailed some form of sexual abuse that she did not want to relate.

At the same time, the sample to which I have had access may well have excluded people who have information that relates to abuse within the liberation movement, but about which people do not wish to talk. One person who I tried to interview said, ‘I do not want to go there.’ This may, from what I have heard, have related to a romantic relationship, but it may also have been a case of abuse. I do not know and am aware that partly because I am a man I may not be told certain things. (See also Lyons 2004, an Australian woman who encountered similar constraints in interviewing former Zimbabwean female combatants.)

That I am from the liberation movement and previously in a leadership position may have had an impact on the interview relationship. There may be a constraint that some people feel about raising scandalous matters with someone who is perceived as a member of leadership (even though no longer that). Also, because of the sense of

hierarchy within the organisation, there may have been a desire to say what pleases an interviewer perceived to be in leadership. It is my impression, however, that the types of people interviewed were not likely to have been impressed by alleged or actual places that the interviewer may have held in ANC hierarchies, and that whatever silences there may have been would have been for other reasons that have not impacted on the veracity of the evidence collected.

## Underground history in South Africa

The history of women's involvement in underground organisation does not begin with the banning of the ANC. It stretches back to the early years of the twentieth century when women were amongst groups who trained in Comintern<sup>2</sup> universities, learning underground methods (Davidson et al. 2003). The decades that followed saw much clandestine activity of Communists with the hosting of Comintern agents or arranging of visits of individuals or delegations to Moscow. Women like Ray Alexander were very involved in such activities (Simons 2004).

When the Communist Party was proscribed and subsequently reconstituted underground, many women were active at various stages of its illegal existence, inside and later outside the country or in units that were formed after the Rivonia reverses (cf. Suttner 2004).

The ANC prepared for underground from the moment of the Communist Party's dissolution in 1950, implementing the M-Plan during the 1950s. Women were involved, though this chapter does not contain interviews on that period. The banning of the ANC forced the organisation to turn the theoretical preparations of the M-Plan, which were uneven in their impact, into a practical but ill-prepared plan of action. Women were very much part of this early underground, which was more or less smashed or driven into substantial 'invisibility' in the mid-1960s.

Although the early formation of MK in 1961 may have comprised mainly men, women were to be amongst the earliest trainees, including Jacqueline Molefe (Sedibe). But women not formally connected to MK were often involved throughout the period of illegality in ensuring the success of various military operations.

The crushing of the ANC leadership in Rivonia, leading to imprisonment and exile, left a difficult task for those who remained at large under various forms of restrictions. Women like Albertina Sisulu and, in a separate group, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Joyce Sikakhane, Shantie Naidoo and others, slowly rebuilt the underground in the Soweto area. While I do not have information for this period in other areas, it is reasonable to assume that similar processes were in motion, partly because certain members of the Soweto group did travel to other areas with this in mind (Houston 2004).

In the late 1960s and even earlier some of the first trained MK groups entered the country. It is not clear to what extent women in the underground provided logistical

support for them, though Dorothy Nyembe was convicted for assisting MK soldiers, some of whom had reached South Africa after the Wankie Campaign (Houston 2004).

In addition, from the outset underground groups like that in Soweto were involved in recruiting for MK. This is said to have been a major underground activity of units in which Albertina Sisulu was involved (Sisulu 2002). Contrary to conventional wisdom, parents did not always discourage political involvement of their children and in some cases were involved in their recruitment (Marx 1992; Sisulu 2002; Tshabalala interview).

From the beginning small numbers of women joined MK and after 1976 larger numbers (see for example Bernstein 1994; Cock 1991). Many women were involved in various types of underground units throughout this period, some from inside, but some sent in for particular missions.

### **What was the character of women's involvement in the underground?**

Existing historiography has from an early stage tended to dismiss or downplay the involvement of women in political struggle, for entering as 'mothers', or supportive of the role of men, or performing conventional female roles.

Much of this commentary operates with narrow conceptions of what a feminist role can be, assuming that contexts do not alter or modify the meaning of what may mean reproducing a patriarchal relationship under other circumstances. Likewise, notions of motherhood are treated as static and do not take adequate account of the reasons why women's first point of entry into the political arena is often as mothers. It also fails to recognise that male protection of womenfolk is not merely a 'proprietary' right, but also an attempt to provide protection against real and ever-present dangers specific to apartheid repression, especially manifested when in police custody (see Suttner 2005).

The critics also do not place sufficient weight on the importance of women entering the public domain *per se*. This we know is the area where men are supposed to realise themselves as men just as women are supposed to find fulfilment in the private sphere (see Whitehead 2002).

In the context of underground struggle, considered within the wide spectrum of the definition already provided, it is impossible to provide numbers of women who participated. The problem with providing statistics for the underground as a whole, or even for armed struggle as a whole, is that, as indicated, there are both formal and informal contributions, the latter often being as important for the success of an operation as the former.

Whatever the exact number, women were present in significant numbers, albeit generally a minority. But that presence was suffused with ambiguities. The ambiguities of the roles of women related to the often-varied responses of the men they worked with, or under whose command they fell (though many women were also commanders).

One cannot therefore define the emergence of women in the ANC underground independent of notions of masculinity and models of masculinity represented by some heroic figures within the organisation and its underground structures. One cannot make bald and unqualified assertions since the situation was often complicated and contra-

dictory and the responses of both men and women were by no means uniform. Also, the period of women's involvement in the underground was one where the gender consciousness of the ANC as an organisation was gradually developing. The early entry and modes of relating to women in MK could not be grounded as firmly in constitutional texts of the organisation as the place of women can now be defended, in the light of the ANC having formally embraced gender equality and promoted it in a democratic South African Constitution.

## (S)Heroic projects

Elaine Unterhalter suggests that 'struggle autobiographies', mainly by males, are cast in the mould of a notion of 'heroic masculinity', where men are the main performers of heroic deeds (Unterhalter 2000). They build bonds of solidarity between men, and the home is a place of comfort and the private domain reserved for and preserved by women. The role of women in this notion is primarily supportive or, put crudely, to wave husbands goodbye when they embark on their heroic missions. It is a place from which men depart but also a place of comfort to which they retreat after performing various male-centred tasks.

Notions of 'heroic masculinity' have been drawn from masculinity theories and applied to the South African situation (cf. Unterhalter 2000; see more generally Whitehead 2002). While there is definitely something useful and suggestive in this approach, we need to be extremely wary of casting notions of heroism within a monolithic model. Even where someone may be correctly designated a male hero, by the definitions of the struggle concerned or by other forms of characterisation, we may well find, as the evidence to be presented shows, that these heroic figures have quite varied ways of playing out their masculinity and heroism or conduct themselves in a manner that requires modification of this notion. This is not to necessarily contest the way in which some literature does depict male heroism, as Unterhalter shows. But that is not the only model of manhood and heroism found within the ANC-led national liberation movement. Most importantly, the 'heroic project' was never confined to men. It was also a (s)heroic project, belonging to women.

### Depictions of heroism as the prerogative of men

Ben Turok's autobiography has given credence to the notion that heroism is a characteristic peculiar to men. Underground work is the preserve of the man, who is assumed to 'make history', and the woman's domain is the private sphere (see Whitehead 2002). Thus Turok wrote after he had placed a bomb at the Rissik Street post office:

Mary [his wife] asked me what the matter was and I was not able to tell her...When she read the newspaper the next day, everything became clear. She

was rather resentful at not having known about my MK role...*Certainly, she had to pay as high a price as I did. She had previously been left with the children while I was in hiding and she had to face the police when I was away. But our security demanded this kind of balance and she was bound to accept the arrangement.* (2003: 130, emphasis added)

And again:

Deeply steeped in these [revolutionary] texts, I now saw myself as a typical communist revolutionary. I held senior posts in the ANC,<sup>3</sup> SACP and MK. My personal life was now overtaken by my being swamped with work; I was constantly in meetings. Mary had also become fully integrated into the work of the COD<sup>4</sup> as chair of the Johannesburg branch *while trying hard not to neglect the boys...* (2003: 139, emphasis added)

In other words, Ben Turok's job was to concentrate on revolutionary activities. Mary could be involved, but without neglecting the children.

Unterhalter's study identifies a common construction of masculinity in texts across race, class and generation:

Heroism and adventure is work lived exclusively in the public realm, which must be supported unquestioningly by the private sphere (mothers, wives, girlfriends, children)...In men's autobiographical writing the support provided by a feminised portrayal of 'home' is always complemented by male camaraderie, deep bonds of friendship formed in adversity. Side by side with heroic autonomy, is deep loyalty generally to other men. If there is a choice between the private (feminine) world and the public sphere of heroism and adventure, the choice is always made by the author for the public world, backed up by reference to history... (2000: 166–7)

It may be that this is what is accurately conveyed from reading these works. But further evidence, from outside such writings, creates more complexity. There were women, like Ray Alexander, who joined the Communist underground, while her husband Jack Simons refused, to some extent reversing conventional domestic responsibilities (cf. Simons 2004; Suttner 2004). This replicated a pattern in their marriage, where Jack, a leading theorist, would drive Ray to trade union negotiations and wait in the car, having to content himself with his books, flask and sandwiches (Simons 2004).

There were, as indicated, women as well as men in MK and the broader underground. In some cases these women had men under their command (see below and Radebe interview). There were many such women. Amongst those that I know of are Jackie Molefe, Lindiwe Zulu, Thandi Modise, Marion Sparg, Dipuo Mvelase and Thenjiwe Mtintso.

## Women in MK: the ‘heroic female project’

The notion of a ‘heroic male project’ is clearly disrupted by women embarking on ‘heroic projects’, working underground and going to war with the apartheid regime.

‘We lived in the same camps. The women did exactly the same training as the men. Exactly the same. Drilling, handling weapons, topography...everything’ (Gwendoline Sello in Bernstein 1994: 149; see also Cock 1991; von den Steinen 1999).

But the experience was by no means unambiguous and unproblematic. Impressions and reflections on this period convey more than one message and interpretation. One of the negative experiences encountered by some was the ‘male camaraderie’, referred to by Unterhalter. Katleho Moloi reported that the men did not take the women seriously or undermined them or considered them a threat (Bernstein 1994).

Referring to ‘male camaraderie’, although not using those words, Moloi notes, ‘And you could see some of the things that you’re not involved in. It’s only men, who stand there whispering. And then they’re gone; and you start asking yourself, “Why am I being left out?”’ (Bernstein 1994: 183; see also von den Steinen 1999).

Often there was an initial assumption that women did not come to join MK or go into exile in their own right, but to follow a lover. Thus Shirley Gunn was asked, ‘Whom are you following?’ (Gunn interview).

But others like Thandi Modise report different types of experiences (see Thandi Modise in Cock 1991, qualified in her later interview with Curnow 2000). Likewise, Jacqueline Molefe, now General Sedibe, claims that women earned, through their actions, the respect of men in the army and were treated as equals (see Cock 1991). Faith Radebe also did not experience men as undermining of her or other female members of MK, and in fact considered them supportive and pleased to have women as leaders in particular situations (Radebe interview).

Also, it appears that some of the male leaders and commanders, especially Chris Hani, were intolerant of practices undermining of women (Mvelase interview).

## Problems of intimate relations

There were also problems in terms of intimate relations between men and women (von den Steinen 1999). The numerical imbalance, with men far outnumbering women, would create tensions and frustrations under any circumstances.

But the frustrations and resentments were magnified by the inequality of status. Many women formed relationships with senior figures. It is sometimes suggested that this related to the capacity of these men to provide more of the good things of life in a harsh environment (Hassim 2004).

Insofar as the women had to relate in their training with the trainees and not the commanders with whom they may have formed relationships, this caused tensions and

made it more difficult to relate amicably. Some commissars, while admitting the right of these women to form such relationships, advised them to be discreet and treat the relationships as private (von den Steinen 1999). It was considered desirable, in order to respect the feelings of those not in relationships, to conduct romantic affairs in semi-underground fashion (Radebe interview).

Insofar as high rank sometimes led commanders to exploit the vulnerability of new recruits, Chris Hani took preventative steps. Dipuo Mvelase reports:

There was a situation where in our army there were very few women and they come into the army, officers will jump for them, all of them and use, or misuse their powers and the authority that they have to get women. That led to some nasty situations. Comrade Chris established this Rule 25 – it was a new rule – that no officer will have a relationship with a new recruit because it is an unfair relationship. A recruit needs to be given a chance to know our army so that they can make a decision about these things and understand...things because when they come in people use their authority and the difficulties of training as a soldier, to start relationships with these women. The rule was a problem with officers. But not that they could defy Comrade Chris. People complained about it, but it was observed. (Mvelase interview)

Mvelase claimed ‘there was no time that Comrade Chris left the camps without sensitising all of us about the gender issue and taking it up seriously, not only with the soldiers but with officers also, with the administration’ (Mvelase interview).

But even if a relationship were established under these difficult conditions, the demands of conducting the struggle often imposed great strain through deployment of lovers/spouses in quite separate places, sometimes leading to their breaking up. Gwendoline Sello, while her marriage survived, describes the situation:

In 1982 I came to get married here in Dar es Salaam. But...most of the time we were never together, because he was fighting most of the time in the front. We stayed together for two years, but only for two years...I was seven years in the GDR [German Democratic Republic]. I didn't see my husband until 1987...Then he joined me, only for two years again and then I left him there when I came back now to Tanzania. Now he's in the GDR...He'll come back in two years. (Bernstein 1994: 150)

Faith Radebe fully accepts the need in a revolution for operational considerations to take precedence. But this placed intolerable strain on her marriage. Husband and wife were not able to spend time together or sufficient time together at important moments of personal crisis or illness. She is clear that this did not feed into already existing weaknesses in her marriage, but literally the demands of the national liberation movement made it impossible to relate in a manner that could sustain the relationship. But she did not blame or repudiate the revolution or the liberation movement. It is a

reality that Radebe sees as regrettable but one of the necessary or inevitable fallouts from a revolution (Radebe interview).<sup>5</sup> (For other examples, see Bernstein 1994.)

## Abuses

There were undoubtedly situations of sexual harassment or abuse or rape and it was sometimes hard to report these or to find adequate mechanisms for protection (Modise<sup>6</sup> in Curnow 2000; von den Steinen 1999). The exact extent of this phenomenon does not appear to be quantifiable on the information currently available. While some report harassment, others never encountered it (eg. Radebe interview). It constantly surfaced in the women's section meetings (Hassim 2004).

Again, this is one of those subjects which, as in all situations, tends to be under-reported where it occurs, and also, many who may have experienced such abuse would be more likely to relate it to a woman than to a man. What is presented here does not pretend to be more than an indication of a phenomenon which is not unexpected, but on which adequate evidence is not yet available.

Nevertheless, without any evidence one can posit a hypothetical situation conducive to abuse. If a woman were raped in an underground unit, would she be free to access normal legal remedies? If she were to do so, presumably the entire unit, innocent and guilty alike, might be exposed to the police. This hypothetical situation may have been actual experiences in some cases. I do not know and have not heard of any such case. It does, however, raise conflicting moral questions: the need to safeguard the security of the unit as a whole and the right of a woman to protection from abuse. Can one find a way to avoid pitting one principle or right against the other?

This is hypothetical and I do not propose how it should be resolved or suggest how it may have been resolved had it happened. It is merely raised as illustrative of problematic questions that may arise in dealing with instances of abuse.

Conditions of subterfuge within the country also lent themselves to deception in personal relationships. Statements to the effect that 'a cadre of the movement can be called for duty any hour of the day or night' could obviously be used and were used in order to cover extramarital and other relationships.

## Women, pregnancy and children

If sexual relations resulted in pregnancy it tended to lead to the woman's political activities being prejudiced more severely than that of the man, with her generally being sent to Tanzania (Hassim 2004; von den Steinen 1999). Because of the difficult conditions there, this may have been interpreted not only as a way of treating pregnancy, but as punitive.

But women insisted on being able to continue as fighters or to take part fully in other activities and appear to have won these rights, insofar as there were childcare facilities in Tanzania able to house the children in the event of the mother being posted elsewhere (von den Steinen 1999).

Not all women left their children behind. Some were able to take them with on assignments they embarked on, including sometimes working underground inside the country. In some cases, the mother/child relationship appeared less likely to lead to suspicion of being a trained MK soldier (Gunn interview; von den Steinen 1999).

Interestingly, at another level the often stereotypical notion of macho soldiers is qualified by Faith Radebe's account of male soldiers' longing to have children visit the camp in Angola. She reports how they continually asked that Angolan women be allowed to visit with their children so that they could have children around them.

In addition, in the same camp men objected to women who were pregnant being sent to Tanzania to have their babies. They wanted the women to give birth in the camp and facilities to be provided. They longed for elements of normality in their lives, represented in this case by the presence of babies (Radebe interview).

## Deployment of women

Some statements suggest that women were not adequately deployed, that the organisation was reluctant to place them in dangerous situations, especially in combat (Cock 1991; Lyons & Israel 1999; von den Steinen 1999). The evidence by no means completely supports this view and may, instead, be based on a flawed conception of what is meant by 'combat' or dangerous work. In the first place, where von den Steinen (1999) refers to serving in the immediate frontline states, at best as couriers or in communication inside the country, as apparently less dangerous, this is mistaken. Likewise, Lyons and Israel, although writing mainly of Zimbabwe in an article referring to southern Africa in general, refer to women carrying weapons and ammunition across the borders – 'an inglorious but necessary task' (Lyons & Israel 1999: 7).

But this *was* dangerous and indeed essential work and generally part of the important preparation prior to crucial operations. In fact, the use of the word 'necessary' is in itself an admission that without the task being performed the overall action could not have been executed. It may have been that in some situations people better suited to certain work, in the sense of being less likely to attract attention to what they were doing, would be male and female in other situations.

But it is important that we do not fetishise a narrow conception of combat as meaning direct physical fighting. It needs to be understood as entailing a number of components, including planning, reconnaissance and a variety of other forms of preparation. Indeed, *sometimes where women performed a conventional role as mothers providing for 'sons' in feeding them, they were not merely perpetuating traditional female roles, but performing an essential element of the success of a military operation.* What Irene Staunton writes of the Zimbabwean liberation war has wider application:

These women, the mothers, were both victims and actors. Throughout the war, over and over again, they fed and protected the freedom fighters and they risked

their lives to do so. This they know and it is a fact of which they are proud. ‘The men were around, but they only used to say, “Hurry up [with the food] before the soldiers come and beat you up!”’ They regarded the *vakomana* [the boys, i.e. the freedom fighters] as their children, everybody’s children, with needs, which they as women, as mothers, had a responsibility to meet. (Staunton 1990: xi–xii)

In other words, the same phenomenon – a woman putting food on the table – has more than one meaning. Or are we to merely ascribe to all of these contexts the same meaning, that women are cast in a specific role where they serve the needs of menfolk, or do we give a different meaning, where as in the quotation from Staunton, what the mothers do is an essential component of the war effort?

Totsie Memela’s work in reconnaissance, which may be the type of activity described as less ‘glorious’, appears to have been just as dangerous as the actual infiltration of the *Vula* group for which she prepared, having to ensure that every point at which they entered, every place where they would stay, was safe.<sup>7</sup> In so doing she tested the danger or otherwise of the various elements of the enterprise before the group entered (Memela interview). Earlier, people like Dorothy Nyembe, in providing shelter and other assistance to MK soldiers in the late 1960s – without herself engaging in direct combat – were as essential to their activities as the weapons they carried (Houston 2004).

Totsie Memela’s work entailed going into the country and included smuggling in arms, in false bottoms of suitcases and other items, and within the doors of cars, and placing these in DLBs<sup>8</sup> where they could be picked up by fighters. Memela describes how her expertise developed:

And as time went on I had gone...for training in Angola, and when I came back I was able to actually prepare DLBs, actually put guns and be able now to write maps for people to be able to come and pick that up. And know more about DLBs and how do you make sure, where do you put the information for people to know where the dropping has been. How do you make sure that you’ve put the signs so that they can be able to see where you’ve actually dropped the guns? And some of the times I would get specific people that I’d been told to go and give the material to. I would have to make sure that I have cleared my route, I understand what’s going on to make sure that I don’t get arrested, and later on starting actually infiltrating people, comrades, from outside. (Memela interview)

‘We’d go to the North and we’d drop material.’ This often entailed Memela herself finding a suitable spot for a DLB during the day, digging in the evenings on farms, and ensuring that the signage (the way of identifying its location) was sufficiently simple for soldiers to be able to find the materiel. There had to be clear timing for picking up the weaponry and no need for compasses or complicated methods to find the DLB.

I kept on graduating in terms of the responsibilities...but the bulk of the time my role was infiltration, which started from a simple letter and later on I was now

infiltrating or taking people outside the country, groups of people. At the time, for example, when in Natal, there was quite a bit of violence, I used to take out students and I would come inside. And I was coming into the country illegally [initially she used to do ANC work while entering legally]. I would come into the country...make the connections and...take out these groups...because I had quite a huge network in Swaziland. And then I would take them to...safe houses and... send them through to Mozambique for all sorts of different things. (Memela interview)

Sometimes Memela had to take out leadership figures when things became hot for them; sometimes she had to bring in people like Mac Maharaj or Siphiwe Nyanda. In every case, routes had to be checked, patterns of roadblocks known and information had to be available should these change. It required legends to cover the presence of individuals in parts of the route, should they be discovered. It required means of communication to know whether or not they had arrived safely.

It is, however, important to acknowledge the reality that much of the direct combat experience of most MK soldiers was in Angola, fighting the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA<sup>9</sup>) or protecting camps against South African Defence Force (SADF) bombings. In many of the Angolan campaigns women were in the forefront of armed combat (Bernstein 1994). Wally Serote relates a situation where a group was ambushed and a woman soldier turned an anti-aircraft gun into an artillery weapon against UNITA, covering the retreat of her comrades and sacrificing her own life (Serote conversation).

This is not to suggest that the tendency to deploy women in traditional female roles, as typists and clerks, was not prevalent. But there were important exceptions and there were fairly substantial numbers of women engaged in dangerous work and combat. Not all sections of the predominantly male leadership accepted restrictions on deployment of women to 'more dangerous work' (see below). Jacklyn Cock correctly questions the notion of combat that is often used in order to assess the involvement of women:

[W]omen have not generally been used in combat roles, as that is conventionally defined to mean direct, hand-to-hand fighting in confrontation with the enemy. As a guerrilla army, MK has not engaged in much of this kind of conventional combat, but the exclusion of women from combat may be significant given that the experience and tradition of actual combat with the enemy is an important ingredient in MK's prestige.

No women combatants are mentioned by name in the NEC's [National Executive Committee's] statement delivered by Tambo on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of MK...The exclusion of women from traditional combat means that no woman participated directly in the famous MK actions that are now the subject of myth in the townships – actions such as the 1967 Wankie campaign...Women were

also generally excluded from combat roles in Angola, where MK soldiers gained battlefield experience and fought against Unita.<sup>10</sup> Nor were women directly involved in any of the really spectacular MK missions such as the attack on Sasol in June 1980, or the Goch Street shootout led by Solomon Mahlangu. The word ‘directly’ is important here, because women were extensively deployed as couriers and in surveillance and reconnaissance, so they contributed indirectly to these actions. Furthermore, if ‘combat’ is redefined to mean exposure to danger, then acts of arson and sabotage performed by women MK cadres are part of ‘combat’. (Cock 1991: 165–6)

Chris Hani played an important role in challenging tendencies to confine the role of women:

In our army we had a situation, when we came in, women were deployed mainly in...communications, in the medi-corps or in the offices. Comrade Chris challenged that. We get the same training but we are deployed differently. It is unacceptable for the people’s army. Women should be deployed anywhere they are trained for and he used to be the key person in trying to get women to come into the country [as guerrillas] because his view was we are all trained for combat duties but women tend to get involved in combat-related duties, not in combat itself though they get the same training as men. (Mvelase interview)

Cock indicates problems in the notion of combat itself. In both modern and revolutionary war one tends to find a situation without:

direct confrontation and where the boundaries between ‘front’ and ‘rear’ cannot be sharply demarcated. There is no doubt that women have played an important and courageous part in MK activities. Undoubtedly the nature of the struggle and the breakdown of normal male–female roles encouraged *many women to discover new capacities within themselves*. They formed a complex web of support that sustained combatants in many ways; they provided much of the infrastructure of resistance – they acted as couriers, they provided intelligence and refuge... (Cock 1991: 167, emphasis added) (On MK as an empowering experience, see Radebe interview and Mtintso in Hassim 2004.)

Cock also refers to partly mythological images of female fighters, as well as actual cases of MK women guerrillas crossing the border for combat, which tends to indicate that the extent and nature of deployment needs further research (Cock 1991). It should be mentioned that mythology is often just as important in regard to MK as actual performance or, in this case, the actual presence of a particular category of soldier. The inspiration of a popular army and its impact on popular imagination may have been far greater than the actual scale of the attacks that it executed. That there was a belief that women were deployed in a particular place may well have inspired others to take action themselves.

## **Masculinisation of women as the price of working in MK and underground generally?**

Cock remarks on a sense that some women had that the wearing of military fatigues led to their losing their femininity. She refers to the SADF maintaining a hierarchical ideology of gender roles and cultivating a subordinate and decorative notion of femininity. On the other hand, ‘the egalitarian ideology of MK sometimes involved a denial of femininity’ that she cites one informant as finding irksome (Cock 1991: 168).

Sometimes when women did what was required to succeed in the army, they claim it evoked resentment from some of the men. This is by no means a universal experience. In fact, as Cock’s and my own research has shown, the experiences of women were not one and the same. Different women wanted to assert themselves or found they had to assert themselves differently in order to succeed in MK. Different women had different ways of claiming or did not wish to assert their femininity, as they understood it. The response of the men also varied and was often very supportive (cf. Radebe interview).

It seems that many women enjoyed weekends when they could wear conventional clothes and affirm their being women in a way that was akin to what they would have done in ‘normal life’, and not be purely soldiers. Wally Serote describes an image he has in a camp, where Thenjiwe Mtintso emerged from her tent wearing a miniskirt, with a pistol in her belt (Serote conversation).

This raises a number of interesting questions. Did women generally, often or sometimes have to pay a price in joining MK, in terms of contesting their right to be women – as they saw it – as well as soldiers? Or did they have to suppress elements of their conceptions of their own femininity in order to be acceptable? In other words, was there a ‘masculinisation’ of women, the adoption of modes of behaviour that conformed to a militarised conception of masculinity in order to win acceptance?

There is nothing unusual about such a phenomenon, that women might under certain circumstances become ‘masculinised’. A contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* states:

[M]asculinity does not only have to do with men. From the woman who is simply assertive, strong and self-confident to the woman who explicitly identifies as butch, to defy the boundaries imposed by femininity is to be deemed ‘masculine’...Excursions into ‘masculinity’ by women would not be socially frowned upon were they not recognised to be claims on social power. (Code 2000: 324; see also Connell 2000)

In fact, there is much research in Africa showing examples of the capacity to transcend biological sex (see Miescher & Lindsay 2003). It is an undeniable reality that women entered a male-dominated terrain, an institutional set-up that tends to be conducive to macho behaviour. It is something that would impact on any army even if differently

constituted and partially mediated in the case of MK by norms of gender equality being gradually consolidated.

Even if feminism and notions of gender equality were gaining currency within the ANC, there obviously would remain gaps between the consciousnesses of various people. To this day norms of gender equality are unevenly diffused within the ANC and the society at large. That much is well known. As a result, many men, when seeing women succeed in the military, would have perceived this as a claim on ‘social power’ within a terrain regarded as a male preserve. This would consequently provoke some form of antagonism.

Related to that and to the earlier part of the *Encyclopedia* quotation, the reference to women being ‘butch’ has relevance to the way two white women underground workers, Barbara Hogan and Marion Sparg, were depicted by the media and judicial authorities. On their arrest both were treated by the media as misfits, with nasty references to their being overweight.

In other words, because the idea of a white woman identifying herself fully with the cause of the oppressed black people of South Africa was in itself abhorrent, identification as an underground worker, and especially as a trained soldier in the case of Sparg, was particularly repugnant to the white male view of what should constitute femininity. Consequently, the only way of reconciling what was irreconcilable in their understanding was to deny their femininity.

## Suppression of the personal?

There is no doubt that the requirements of revolutionary conduct required sacrifices and suppression of emotional and other needs expressed in normal social relations. People in the underground and especially in MK found themselves in exceptionally difficult and stressful situations where they had to deny or could not give expression to important parts of their personality. The joining of any organisation requires submission of one’s personal will, in varying degrees, to that of the collective or those to whom the collective have delegated authority – in the case of an army, its command structures.

Likewise, in a political organisation, especially underground, one cannot always act according to one’s own judgement and certainly not without some degree of authorisation or consultation.

In essence, the idea of a revolutionary imbued in the liberation struggle is one of an individual who expects nothing personally, who is prepared to sacrifice all personal needs in order to ensure the success of the struggle. (cf. Hermet 1971, writing on the Spanish Communist Party’s underground experience.) Consequently, there is no sacrifice too great that can be offered or expected and there is no situation where personal needs can supplant those of the organisation. The heroic legacy of Party cadres is constantly communicated to members (Hermet 1971). The exemplary revolutionary

life of Ernesto ‘Ché’ Guevara, the famous Argentinean-born Cuban revolutionary, inspired generations of revolutionaries throughout the world (cf. Guevara 1997; see discussion in Suttner 2005).

The argument will not be that some harmonisation between personal and political needs was always impossible. There are cases where it was achieved, despite the great stresses. It may be that Albertina and Walter Sisulu achieved this in their marriage (Sisulu 2002; Suttner in *Mail & Guardian* 19.02.2003). Walter and Albertina Sisulu’s responsibilities to the ‘ANC as family’ do not seem to have impaired their conventional role and exercise of responsibilities to children and grandchildren. In fact, Walter Sisulu was constantly consulted on Robben Island about the naming of children or his advice was sought on family issues. In the case of Albertina Sisulu, her role as mother cannot be narrowly confined to that of a caregiver or whatever other conventional notions attach to motherhood. As a mother, she also saw herself as a politiciser of her own children and a wide range of others who came to be embraced in the notion of ‘sons and daughters’ (see Marx 1992; statement of Lindiwe Sisulu in Strasburg 2004).

Whatever the dangers or negative legacies in this perspective for the place of the personal, this orientation may have been one of the conditions necessary for success in revolutionary ventures. Single-mindedness may have been required for successful conduct of the tasks of a revolutionary and may also have helped blot out some of the pain entailed (cf. Suttner 2001).

## ANC/SACP as parents

There is a tendency for the relationship between cadres and an organisation in a revolutionary situation to result in the organisation taking on a variety of social roles in relation to members, roles that would under other situations be attached to other people/categories of people or institutions.

As indicated earlier, much has been made of ‘motherism’ within the ANC, the centrality of mothers on the political terrain. That was the basis on which women initially entered the political terrain and remained the predominant basis on which African women confronted the apartheid regime at a public level in the 1950s and again in the 1970s and 1980s. I do not want to debate whether or not that was a form of feminism, which is so confidently denied. My concern here is with the notion of parenthood and the underground.

What is interesting is that the concept of parenthood and motherhood underwent various permutations in the period of illegality. On the one hand, the conventional role was reinforced in that due to the absence of parents, members of the women’s section were important as mother figures, especially in assisting young mothers who had no other role model around, to advise on feeding and otherwise raising a baby (Hassim 2004; Jordan interview).

MK female guerrillas say they missed their mothers ‘every night’, but that men also did, and Gertrude Shope was asked to come to visit camps for two days instead of one, because so many of the men wanted to interact with a maternal figure (Tshabalala interview).

On the other hand, in the course of joining underground/MK activities, many women had to deny their maternal role in leaving their children behind and some men also denied parenthood in relation to their own sons and daughters. Most felt great pain on doing this (see Bernstein 1994). But others saw it as part of a conception of broader parenthood. One father acknowledged that he placed no special weight on the relationship with his own son who sought him out on the parade ground. He said that all the men there were his sons (see Reddy & Karterud 1995; Suttner 2005).

This relates to the phenomenon in revolutionary situations where the organisation tends to displace actual parents as an overarching parent. In South Africa, Communists sometimes used the word ‘family’ as a metaphor or code word to refer to the Party, something found in many Communist Parties (see Hermet 1971).

But this was also true of the ANC. One woman cadre, in explaining to her children that she had to leave them behind in Tanzania in order to execute an ANC assignment, told them, ‘Although I may be your mother, your real mother and father are the ANC. The ANC will look after you, feed you and clothe you’ (Majodina 1995: 29). (This trust in the care provided was not universal. See Hassim 2004.)

When comrades wanted to marry while in MK, permission had to be sought from the ANC leadership. Security considerations made contact with family back home difficult if not impossible, and placed strain on young couples who felt that taking such a step without the knowledge of their family was problematic (von den Steinen 1999).

Baleka Mbete argues that the need for the organisation to approve was not authoritarian but a responsible attitude, ensuring that adequate investigations were conducted to ensure that other parties were not prejudiced, for example, undisclosed spouses left behind in South Africa. There was also an overall need to care for young people who left in their teens and had no role models, other than the mothers and fathers in the ANC (Mbete and Jordan interviews).

This displacement of ‘normal’ interpersonal relationships that would conventionally take precedence in one’s life, by the relationship to the organisation and the struggle as a whole, finds expression also in notions of ‘revolutionary love’ or ‘love for the people’ and similar phrases (see Suttner 2005). But though this may have happened, it does seem that successful revolutionary activity may have required such suppression and repression of emotions.

## Multifaceted identities

Returning to the earlier question of whether the price of joining MK or working underground meant the ‘masculinisation’ of women: there is a photograph in a book by

Margaret Randall, depicting a 16-year-old Sandinista woman soldier. In military uniform, there is a rifle on her shoulder, she wears a huge cross round her neck and in her shirt pocket there is a pen and a nail file. The caption reads: ‘Somewhere in Nicaragua’ this sixteen year old woman defends her country...with a gun, a cross, a nail file and a pen’ (Randall 1985: np).

What is captured so clearly is that this woman entering the military world comes with multiple identities. Some of these are in abeyance at various times and are only acted on at particular moments. This young soldier can attack the ‘contras’. She may write poetry. She may read the scriptures and at moments of leisure she will care for her nails.

It is true then that in a revolution elements of one’s personality tend to be repressed. For operational reasons one’s desire to be with someone may be interrupted. One may be sent far away to do the business of the revolution. That does not mean that the desire for one’s normal life or the normal life that one hopes to enjoy in a democratic society is therefore obliterated. It has to wait unfortunately but it may still be what most revolutionaries still hope to enjoy.



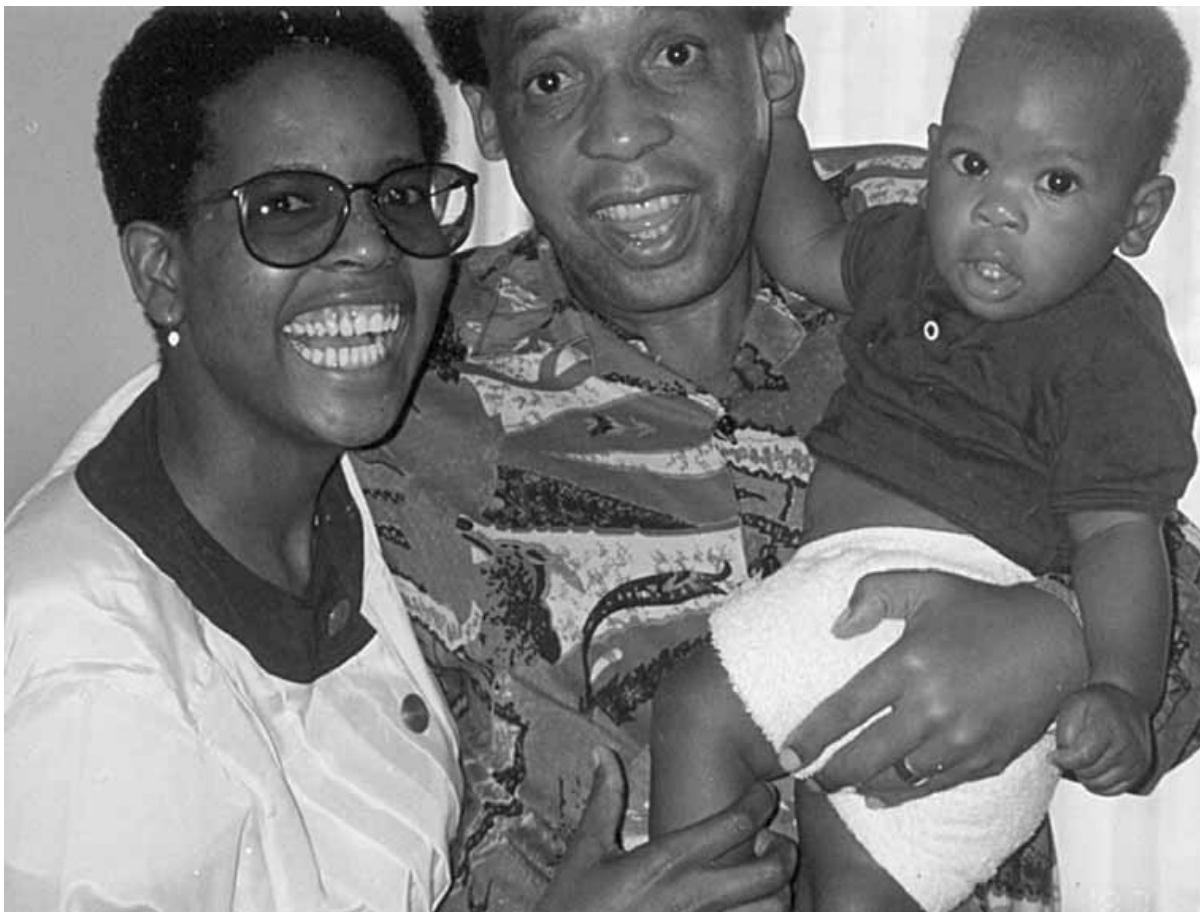
Sandinista woman soldier

## Male role

What role women played in the underground and MK was crucially dependent on the attitude of male soldiers and other cadres, and the extent to which the MK model of a soldier and other underground models could encompass women as well as men. While evidence needs to be gathered on the attitudes of a wider range of people than those whom I have researched, certainly some of the behaviour of Vuyisile Mini, the first MK martyr, subverts conventional notions of the macho male – shedding tears over comrades failing to realise the seriousness of war (see Suttner 2005).

Women in MK testify to Chris Hani departing from what may often have been the norm, making cadres feel that their personal fears and emotional make-up were as much the concern of the army as strategy and tactics. Dipuo Mvelase, a female MK commander, describes how Hani raised issues that for many people were outside the conventional bounds of revolutionary discourse:

He was...a comrade to whom you felt you can say anything and not feel bad about it, whether it is personal or whether it is about the struggle...Someone you



Dipuo Mvelase with her eldest child, Tinyiko, and Chris Hani.

could confide in, probably say certain things that I couldn't even say to my mum...Despite the fact that everybody needed his attention because he was the commander in that area [in Angola], we had about three hundred new recruits and he spent every single evening talking to us. And you felt wanted, you felt at home. You felt important you know.

Asking you about your family, how you feel, what is your experience, do you miss home? Questions that you thought you wouldn't be asked because we are in a revolution...you as a person, you get lost...But Comrade Chris made sure that you don't get lost...[H]e humanised the struggle...He made every one of us feel we count. This is something that one never experienced before, because there are those big expectations that revolutionaries have to do this – have to sacrifice that. That revolutionaries are ordinary people, one never felt that until I met Comrade Chris... (Mvelase and Setsubi interviews)

Hani integrated such concern in the way cadres were briefed prior to being sent on missions into the country:

Comrade Chris's brief...had more to do with you and your readiness than with the details of your mission. He would ask: are you really ready and some people

find they are not really ready to come into the country. But they are scared because they will be called cowards...less revolutionary.

[He made] you feel that if you are not ready it doesn't mean you are less revolutionary...You can still make a contribution and to win the war it doesn't mean you have to be in the country... (Mvelase interview)

## No easy route to characterising the role of women within the ANC underground

This chapter has conveyed the essential conditionality of any assessment of the place of women within the underground activities of the ANC. The ANC carries a number of legacies within its organisational consciousness, practices and individual identities. Some of these are warrior traditions. Some stress specific conditions of manhood that may presuppose limits on the role of women. Yet other elements of that legacy are conducive to realising gender equality. Notions of manhood within the ANC are diverse. It may be that the example of Hani is atypical of MK or MK leadership. He nevertheless represented a role model for many and complicates the picture and indicates the urgent need to go beyond formal texts or other writings and uncover the variety of actual relationships that existed. Before more can be said, further research needs to be done in order to bring this legacy to the surface and unpack the extent to which it impacts on the present.

### NOTES

- 1 The research on which this chapter is based was made possible by generous funding provided over four years by the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala and SIDA. That was a wider project on underground organisation in general. I have also benefited greatly from being hosted in both the Centre for Policy Studies in Johannesburg and the History Department at Unisa in Pretoria. My gender consciousness has been developed through discussions with many people, most notably Nomboniso Gasa and Helen Bradford. I owe a more general debt to Greg Cuthbertson for his overall encouragement and advice. Helen Scanlon read the chapter, but unfortunately her suggestions could not all be incorporated within the time constraints prevailing.
- 2 The Comintern refers to the Communist International, a worldwide organisation of Communist Parties that operated from Moscow from 1919 until 1943. Each member party was referred to as a 'section' of the Communist International (Davidson et al. 2003).
- 3 For the record, whites could not be members of the ANC until the 1969 Morogoro conference allowed membership to those based outside the country.
- 4 This is the abbreviation for the Congress of Democrats, an organisation formed for whites within what became the Congress Alliance, comprising the ANC, South African Indian Congress, Coloured Peoples' Congress, COD and later the South African Congress of Trade Unions, which was formed in 1955.
- 5 Obviously when one is outside of such a struggle and does not make the choices Radebe made one can adopt various moral positions towards the break up of a marriage. But Radebe had made these choices and she recognises the very unfortunate price that resulted from her decisions.
- 6 Modise's earlier interview with Jacklyn Cock (1991) does not mention harassment and is a glowing account of men's respect for women soldiers. I am not inclined to treat this contradiction as a serious problem. The later version is more likely to represent Modise's experience. Having just emerged from prison and instilled in tight military discipline, when she did the first interview, Modise may well have suppressed negative experiences. Given the elapse of a decade before the Curnow interview, she may have felt greater freedom to speak of what she previously concealed. This is not to say that every experience of Modise was replicated for others or that her interpretation of her experience must be accepted in every respect.

- 7 Operation *Vula* was a fundamentally more daring underground operation than that previously attempted, in the sense that it sought to connect external leadership and other operatives on a much more substantial scale with local operatives within the country. It started in the mid-1980s.
- 8 A DLB means a dead letter box, a place where you hide arms or other dangerous items. It is placed in a location that can be identified by other individuals who know where the DLB is being placed. It is emptied without there being any contact between the person(s) who created the DLB and those who access it. So a DLB is a place of storage, which avoids any form of contact between the cadres using the weaponry and the cadre(s) who placed them there. That is the type of security required, knowing as little as possible of other individuals, if missions are to succeed.
- 9 A movement supported by the apartheid regime and competing with the ruling Angolan liberation movement.
- 10 Some of Cock's evidence qualifies this. My evidence is that whether intended or not, women were involved in fighting UNITA. See also Bernstein 1994.

## REFERENCES

- Bernstein H (1994) *The rift. The exile experience of South Africans*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Buntman F (2003) *Robben Island and prisoner resistance to apartheid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cock J (1991) *Colonels and cadres: War and gender in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Code L (ed) (2000) *Encyclopedia of feminist theories*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Connell RW (2000) *The men and the boys*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Curnow R (2000) Interview. Thandi Modise, a woman at war. *Agenda*, 43: 36–40.
- Davidson A, Filatova I, Gorodnov V & Johns S (Eds) (2003) *The Communist International and South Africa: Documentary history, 1919–1939*. London: Frank Cass.
- Guevara C (1997[1965]) *Ché Guevara reader: Writings on guerrilla strategy, politics & revolution*. Melbourne/New York: Ed David Deutschmann/Ocean Press.
- Hassim S (2004) Nationalism, feminism and autonomy: The ANC in exile and the question of women. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30(3): 433–455.
- Hermet G (1971) *The communists in Spain: Study of an underground political movement* (Trans. S Seago & H Fox). Farnborough, Hants: Saxon House.
- Houston G (2004) The post-Rivonia ANC/SACP underground. In South African Democracy Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* (vol. 1) (1960–1970). Cape Town: Zebra Press.
- Jaffer Z (2003) *Our generation*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Lyons T (2004) *Guns and guerilla girls: Women in the Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle*. Trenton, NJ/Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.
- Lyons T & Israel M (1999) Women, resistance and the armed struggle in southern Africa. *African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific: Review and Newsletter*, 21(2): 5–12.
- Majodina Z (1995) *Exiles and homecoming, the untold stories*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.
- Marx AW (1992) *Lessons of struggle: South African internal opposition, 1960–1990*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Miescher SF & Lindsay LA (2003) Introduction: Men and masculinities in modern African history. In LA Lindsay & SF Miescher (Eds) *Men and masculinities in modern Africa*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Middleton J (1998) *Convictions: A woman political prisoner remembers*. Randburg: Ravan Press.
- Randall M (1985) *Women brave in the face of danger: Photographs of and writings by Latin and North American women*. Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press.
- Reddy FG & Karterud SM (1995) Must the revolution eat its children? Working with the African National Congress (ANC) in exile and following its return. In MF Etlin, JW Fidler & BD Cohen (Eds) *Group process and political dynamics*. Madison: International Universities Press.
- Simons R (2004) *All my life and all my strength*. (Edited by R Suttner) Johannesburg: STE Publishers.
- Sisulu E (2002) *Walter & Albertina Sisulu: In our lifetime*. Claremont: David Philip Publishers.
- Staunton I (ed) (1990) *Mothers of the revolution*. Harare: Baobab Books.
- Strasburg T (Director) (2004) *A South African love story – Walter & Albertina Sisulu*. DVD. Quest Star Communications.
- Suttner R (2001) *Inside apartheid's prison: Notes and letters of struggle*. Melbourne and New York/Pietermaritzburg: Ocean Press/University of Natal Press.
- Suttner R (2004) The reconstitution of the South African Communist Party as an underground organisation. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 22(1), January: 43–68.

- Suttner R (2005) Masculinities in the African National Congress-led liberation movement: The underground period, illegal ANC-led liberation movement. *Kleio*, 37: 71–106.
- Turok B (2003) *Nothing but the truth. Behind the ANC's struggle politics*. Johannesburg/Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Unterhalter E (2000) The work of the nation: Heroic masculinity in South African autobiographical writing of the anti-apartheid struggle. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 12(2): 157–178.
- Von den Steinen LK (1999) Soldiers in the struggle. Aspects of the experiences of Umkhonto we Sizwe's rank and file soldiers – The Soweto generation and after. MA thesis. University of Cape Town.
- Whitehead SM (2002) *Men and masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.

## INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS

Interview tapes and transcripts are in the author's possession and will be deposited in a library when transcription is completed.  
Gasa Noloyiso, Johannesburg, 23 December 2002.  
Gunn Shirley, Cape Town, 28 February 2005.  
Jordan Pallo, Cape Town, 20 February 2003.  
Mbete Baleka, Cape Town, 19 February 2003.  
Memela-Khambule Totsie, Pretoria, 20 August 2003.  
Mvelase Dipuo, Johannesburg, 29 June 1993.  
Radebe Faith, Johannesburg, 11 October 2004.  
Serote Wally, Maputo, January 2004.  
Setsubi Nomphumelelo, Pretoria, 20 August 2004.  
Tshabalala Phumla, Johannesburg, 13 July 2003.

# 'Another mother for peace': Women and peace building in South Africa, 1983–2003

JACKLYN COCK

The words 'Another mother for peace' were printed in bold, black letters on turquoise t-shirts. On a number of occasions they were worn proudly by some of the small group of women who demonstrated the link between 'motherhood' and political activism, a link which has been of great significance in South African history (Walker 1995; Wells 1998). Focusing on the period from 1983 when the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) was established until 2003, this chapter will argue that these women contributed to a spectrum of organisational initiatives that collectively provided a social infrastructure for peace building. A crucial component of this infrastructure was a demilitarisation network linked by the demand for a redistribution of power and resources away from militarist interests.<sup>1</sup>

## Peace: a contested notion

It is sometimes claimed that women are more nurturing, less violent, more co-operative and more peace loving than men. However, as has been said of Nazi Germany, 'there were many women responsible for substantial brutality, and many more enthusiastically supported men's brutality' (Gordon 1987: 100). The support of many white women for apartheid brutality is also clear in the 20-year period under review (Cock 1991). This period was one of intense political violence in South Africa, violence which many South Africans defined as a 'war'. No mass-based peace movement emerged to contest this pattern of violent conflict. Throughout the region, under white minority rule (whether of colonialism or apartheid), 'peace' was widely regarded as a problematic and even a contaminated notion. The apartheid regime used the discourse of 'keeping the peace' to maintain white minority rule and justify repression. A commitment to peace and non-violence was frequently interpreted to mean either acquiescence to apartheid

or a denial of the legitimacy of armed struggle as a means of resistance to the colonial or the apartheid regime. As a key peace activist Laura Pollecutt said, 'I have an aversion to the word "peace". It's very loaded. The apartheid government claimed that everyone lived in peace...activists were disturbing the peace' (Pollecutt interview).

An appreciation of our historical and social context is important to avoid importing inappropriate 'eurocentric' notions of peace. As Nathan writes:

Violence is not intrinsically the worst-case scenario, nor peace the ideal state of affairs. For the governments and citizens of stable western democracies, the concept of peace is unproblematic. Defined narrowly as the absence of widespread physical violence, it is held to be an unqualified good in terms of orderly politics and the sanctity of life. In authoritarian states, in contrast, oppressed groups may prize freedom and dignity more than peace and may be prepared to provoke and endure extreme violence to achieve the rights of citizenship. Since hostilities threaten relationships of power and privilege, peace serves the interests of the regime and the foreign powers which support it. (1998: 8)



In the course of the anti-apartheid struggle the notion of 'peace' was elevated above a minimalist (or negative) version of peace as the 'absence of war' to embrace a positive vision of peace that would incorporate notions of justice and social action. 'Peace' was expanded to become an animating ideology; something which implied collective action through a process of struggle rather than simply an outcome or single event. The legacy of apartheid and colonialism is that, for those actors engaged in struggle, the notion of 'peace' became linked to two other elements, social justice and sustainable development.

'Injustice was what motivated my involvement, rather than peace. While I understood why some people took up arms, I always felt very ambivalent about the armed struggle and things like necklacing' (Pollecutt interview).

### **The absence of a peace movement**

There is no single collective actor that constituted the peace movement in South Africa in the period under review and no master 'frame' of peace encoded in any blueprint. 'The struggle for democracy in this country is also a struggle for peace' (Mandela 1993: 7). While the entire anti-apartheid movement may be understood as a peace movement in the sense of resisting the violence of apartheid, there was no 'peace movement' in South

Africa in the sense of a co-ordinated formal alliance that was mass-based and had a shared vision and set of objectives relating to peace.

However, there were organisations that provided a social infrastructure which contributed to long-term peace building. A crucial component of this infrastructure was an informal network of demilitarisation initiatives which challenged militarist enclaves of power and privilege.

### The dynamics of peace building

Peace building is defined as organised efforts to promote human security in societies experiencing or emerging from armed conflict. It was a crucial part of social reconstruction in the southern African region which has been scarred by 30 years of war. Peace building is a comprehensive process; it is 'at the cutting edge of the development and security nexus' (Saucier 1998: 2). It has four main interrelated components: demilitarisation, social reconstruction, democratisation and development.

It follows that sustainable peace building involves a *comprehensive process of social reconstruction* that includes the transformation of social relationships, values, identities, ideologies and social institutions. This involves examining interventions such as the creation of alternative social identities, including demilitarised conceptions of citizenship; the construction of new gender relations which challenge the connection between militarism and masculinity; the operation of various institutions at the regional, national and local level, in both the state and civil society, which allow people to process their demands and conflicts in peaceful ways and promote reconciliation, co-operation, tolerance, security, respect for human rights and social cohesion; a shifting of the various social meanings attached to violence and the means of violence, particularly small arms; attempts to promote alternative values and ideologies through peace education by the church, trade unions and educational institutions and the empowerment of civil society to participate in debates on defence and security.

### Identifying peace-building organisations

It is important to focus on peace-building organisations if we are to avoid a shallow, minimalist notion of peace, which focuses narrowly on the actions of male-dominated elites. However, if peace building is defined as organised efforts to promote human security, then the organisational spectrum is extremely broad. It ranges from gender, human rights, education, health and research organisations to local development initiatives – even sewing groups and women's vegetable gardens. All the peace initiatives along this spectrum contribute to building a stable, peaceful, just and sustainable society. However, this chapter will argue that a demilitarisation network at the core of the social infrastructure for peace building had a special significance.

## **Three processes: militarisation, demilitarisation and re-militarisation**

This demilitarisation network has, over the 20-year period, connected to three different social processes, firstly a process of *militarisation* during the period 1976–90. ‘Militarisation’ is a contested concept (see Cock 2005) but is used here to mark a period of intensified repression and resistance when the apartheid army, the South African Defence Force (SADF), came to be positioned at the centre of a highly militarised society. The period was marked by the mobilisation of resources for war to defend the white minority regime on political, economic and ideological levels (Cock 1989; Grundy 1987). Defence expenditure soared and the power of the SADF expanded to the point where it was positioned at the centre of state decision-making and penetrated deeply into many areas of social life. The SADF played a central role in creating a ‘terrorist state’; which relied on the spread of extreme fear to maintain its authority (Cock 1990). An organisation which challenged this process was the ECC, in which women played a leading role.

The ECC also helped to drive a process of *demilitarisation* in South Africa between 1990 and 1994. This was limited to the state during a period of intense political violence. It was a shallow and uneven process but involved reductions in military expenditure, weapons holdings, force levels, employment in arms production as well as base closures. The ECC’s successor organisation, Ceasefire, played an important role here.

Ceasefire has also been central in challenging the current process of *re-militarisation* which has been under way since 1998. It is clearest in two developments: firstly, the use of the military in foreign policy. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) currently has 930 people deployed in Africa in various peacekeeping tasks in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This emphasis on peacekeeping represents a displacement of the priority to prevent war in the first place and has been used to promote and justify increased defence spending. The second indicator of a re-militarisation process is the SANDF rearment programme. This illustrates a number of disturbing trends, such as a concentration of power in the executive and their lack of accountability to Parliament or civil society, as well as a lack of transparency and the inadequacy of current procurement policies. It is this process which the demilitarisation network targeted.

Women played a crucial role in the organisations which comprised the network. Increasingly, peace-building and demilitarisation initiatives developed a gender lens which recognised the different experiences of women and men, and stressed women’s contribution to peace. Women were not always in leadership positions, but were key activists both in numbers and activities.

The demilitarisation network was a web-like universe, clustered around a few key nodes or hubs. These were linked by the demand for a redistribution of power and resources away from militarist interests, rather than by a shared understanding of ‘peace’.

## Key nodes in the demilitarisation network

### **ECC – ‘The fourth most dangerous organisation in South Africa’**

According to Chris de Villiers, Magnus Malan, then Minister of Defence, told a journalist that the ECC was ‘the fourth most dangerous organisation in South Africa’ after the ANC, the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (De Villiers 1993: 4). In 1988 it was banned, which was ‘an unintended testimony to the degree of ECC’s success’ (Nathan 1989: 308).

In July 1983 at a national Conscientious Objectors Support Group (COSG) conference a decision was made to launch a new movement against conscription. This followed a Black Sash national conference resolution and ECC was formally launched in that year as an alliance of some 18 organisations. It called for ‘a just peace in our land’, an end to conscription and opposed militarisation. Important campaigns in 1985 included the ‘Troops out of the Townships’ campaign, whose ‘Troops Out’ t-shirts became very popular among township youths, as well as the ‘Working for a Just Peace Campaign’ in 1986, which argued for an alternative national service system centred

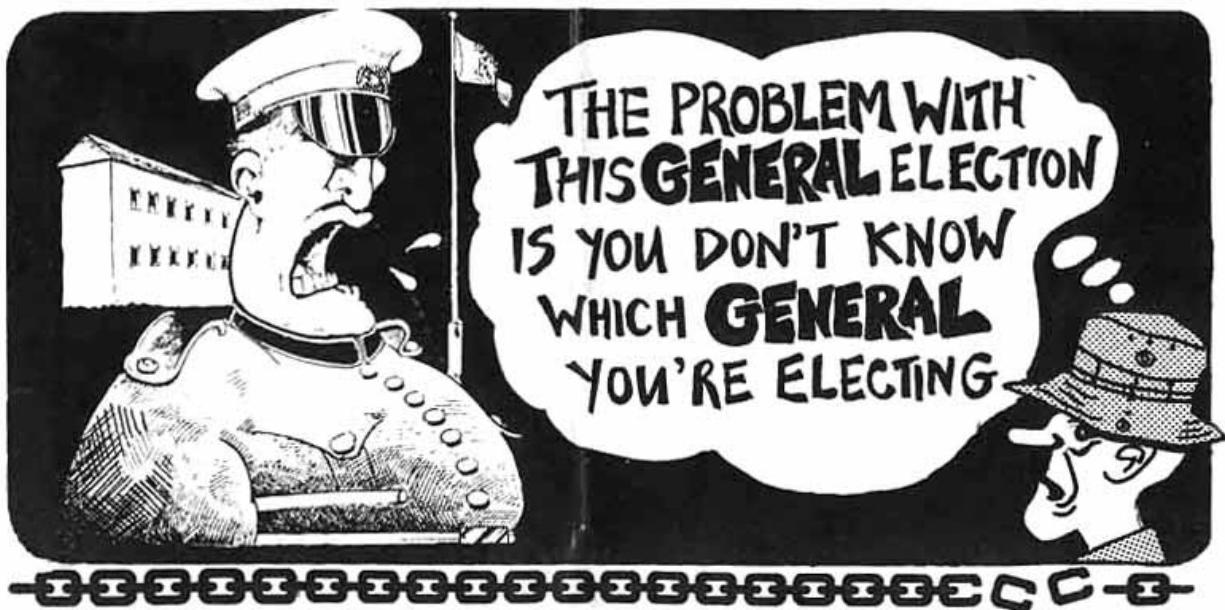
around community projects in townships. ECC members worked on projects such as planting trees, renovating childcare centres and building creches. ‘More than 600 volunteered to become involved in the projects and over 6 000 attended the public rallies at the end of the campaign’ (Nathan 1989: 315). The ‘Stop the call up’ peace festival in Johannesburg in June 1985 was a national event which attracted some 2 000 participants. The programme included an anti-conscription concert, anti-war films and a ‘Posters for peace’ exhibition. On the eve of the festival the Port Elizabeth chair of ECC, Janet Cherry, was detained.



Janet Cherry

Strategies included public meetings, a 21-day public fast by three members in 1985, media work to publicise the trials of conscientious objectors, fun runs, kite-flying, pavement art, street theatre, picnics, fetes, a record called ‘Forces Favourites’, art exhibitions and outdoor events. ECC acquired a reputation for imaginative protests and campaigning. (One of my favourites was a newspaper advertisement – ‘The problem with this general election is you don’t know which general you’re electing.’) A sandcastle built by ECC members on Clifton Beach in Cape Town in the shape of the Cape of Good Hope castle occupied by the SADF was judged a threat to state security. Such tactics involved ‘a level of creativity unknown in white politics’ (Nathan 1989: 312).

The state response to ECC was criminalisation, and to portray it as ‘unpatriotic’ and



'dangerous' (Deputy Minister of Defence in *The Citizen* 15.08.1987). ECC members were subjected to a sustained campaign of harassment and intimidation. From 1985 ECC members were subjected to house searches, tear gas attacks at meetings, death threats, the tapping of telephones, terror tactics such as petrol bombs, motor tyres slashed, brake fluid drained, detention of 75 ECC activists, interrogation and restriction orders. Many women were particularly harshly treated because they were seen to be violating the normative codes of femininity. It is difficult to exaggerate the courage of the women who defied state repression and paid heavily for their commitment. For example, Janet Cherry was detained three times, for 11 months in 1986–87 and for two months in solitary confinement in 1988. State repression culminated in the ECC being banned from public activities in 1988, but re-emerging from 1990–93.

The national secretary and founding member, Adele Kirsten, maintains that, 'Women played a crucial role' (Kirsten interview). The organisation challenged the militarist-masculinity nexus and elaborated alternative models of gender relations (Cock 1991; Conway 2005). Overall, the ECC was 'a significant force in national politics. It mobilised large numbers of whites in anti-apartheid activities, and was regarded by the black community as making a major contribution to building non-racialism' (Nathan 1989: 308). The ECC's commitment to non-racialism led to its developing a close relationship with the United Democratic Front, the largest anti-apartheid organisation in the country at the time. It effectively demonstrated that not all whites were racists. 'We worked very closely with township organisations in practical projects like renovating a pre-school' (Cherry interview).

The ECC covered a very broad ideological spectrum though the fulcrum of the organisation was non-violent resistance to apartheid militarisation. 'ECC wasn't so much anti-war as anti what was going on in South Africa' (Pollicott interview). It included activists who were active in the ANC underground network and who saw ECC as primarily part of the resistance movement.

The ANC said we should be working in the white community to divide the ruling class and challenge the ideological hegemony of the state. The ANC didn't give us clear directions but we had a mandate to pursue anti-militarist campaigns and support conscientious objectors. We came to understand that undermining white support for the SADF was a crucial part of ANC strategy. But the ANC at that time was too militaristic for my liking. For example some ANC pamphlets which we had to distribute were full of militarist sloganising...In the mid-1980s the ANC's energies went too much into military training. A lot of underground activity was about moving weapons and setting up safe houses though I was never involved in that kind of work. (Cherry interview)

Janet Cherry stressed that ECC also contained many principled pacifists and attracted diverse social categories, including mothers whose sons faced conscription into the SADF and who interpreted ECC as a peace movement. 'ECC wasn't just a front for revolutionary activity. It included pacifists, liberals from the Black Sash, church people who argued for the just war doctrine' (Cherry interview). Other key ECC activists such as Nan Cross defined themselves as peace activists who were committed to non-violent forms of resistance and opposed to the ANC's armed struggle. But Adele Kirsten stressed that:

While ECC had a strong anti-militarisation agenda, it drew a lot of apolitical people, people who just had a gut sense that apartheid was wrong. It was an avenue for people to express creative talents...It was an environment in which people were encouraged to grow and develop, to explore and articulate new ideas...Combining the anti-apartheid agenda with the peace agenda was rare...it was difficult to hold that tension. ECC was specifically directed against the militarism of the apartheid state. This was the immediate goal and it was an effective way of mobilising people. (Kirsten interview)

### **Ceasefire**

Ceasefire emerged from the ECC Peace Festival in 1993 which was held ten years after the COSG conference, when the decision was made to launch a campaign against conscription. It was stated that, 'As we stand on the threshold of a new political dispensation in South Africa, we in ECC believe that our work of opposing the conscription system is almost done' (Chris de Villiers, at the Peace Festival). However, it was recognised that the festival could provide the impetus for the formation of a new 'peace movement' which was essential in the light of the high levels of political violence at the time.

Established in 1993 the Ceasefire campaign has consistently called for reductions in military spending and the redirection of resources towards development. Its mission is to 'work towards the demilitarisation of society' and 'towards the reduction and possible elimination of the arms industry in South Africa as well as the reduction and eventual elimination of South Africa's participation in the international arms industry' (Ceasefire's Mission Statement).

Its activities included some powerful campaigns such as the ‘Use the ballot, not the bullet’ campaign around the first general election, active lobbying, the production of a newsletter which reported – in a lively and accessible style – on military activities in the continent, public education and forging links with other organisations such as the Coalition for Defence Alternatives. It formed the Coalition against Military Spending and women such as Laura Pollicutt, Heike Spielberg, Nan Cross, Venitia Govender and the late Stlankie Chipeya played a crucial role. The latter joined Ceasefire in 1999 and saw her work with the Ceasefire campaign as ‘contributing to the involvement of women and civilians in the peace process both nationally and in the region’ (*Ceasefire Anti War News* June/July 2001: 8). The organisation made significant submissions to the defence review process, though according to one informant, ‘We were seen and heard and then dismissed’ (Spielberg interview).

Such interventions required courage. For example, criticisms of arms expenditure were described as ‘unpatriotic’ and criticisms of the 1998 Lesotho military intervention were described by Azis Pahad as ‘treasonable’. According to Corlett Letlojane, ‘any challenge to the military is seen as anti-government’ (Ceasefire workshop 16.11.1998).

Overall, Ceasefire is not a pacifist organisation though there are intense internal debates on the issue.

### ***Gun Free South Africa***

For the key peace activist Adele Kirsten, ‘GFSA [Gun Free South Africa] was the continuation of what I’d been doing as ECC national secretary. It was the logical next step. Both organisations involved opposition and were anti-militarist but they also put forward a vision of the kind of society we would like to create’ (Kirsten interview).

GFSA did pioneering work opposing the proliferation of firearms as a form of privatised militarism. It was a tiny organisation with a small budget, no government funding, and only three full-time workers, which meant that it depended heavily on volunteer energy. It focused on public awareness and policy advocacy to promote a disarmament culture and, along with the Institute for Security Studies, strengthening South Africa’s role in the UN in the co-ordination of international efforts against the illicit trade in small arms. It was ‘particularly committed to work at the grassroots level where we are trying to influence gun-carrying behaviour, with a special focus on young people’ (Kirsten interview). In 1999 GFSA launched a coalition around a charter calling for greater gun control to be endorsed by organisations and individuals.

Established in 1994, its initial impact was limited. In a campaign in that year only a few hundred guns were handed in, mainly white owned and licensed. But even then, according to Kirsten, the campaign ‘raised public awareness about the proliferation of firearms in our society and made it an issue for public debate. It also placed the issue on the political agenda. The ANC national conference adopted a resolution supporting Gun Free’ (Kirsten interview).

Since then it may claim several significant impacts. For example, it helped to change gun control policy. The Firearms Control Act includes stricter control in the form of mandatory competency tests, regular renewal of licences, and an increased age limit, which are all changes GFSA campaigned for. The organisation maintains that its successes included the fact that the new South African Constitution excluded the right to own firearms. This ‘has ensured that gun ownership will remain a privilege rather than an entrenched right’ (Kirsten interview).

GFSA has also contributed to changing the social meanings attached to firearms. This was evident in the increasing numbers of private and public buildings that have declared themselves gun free zones in which firearms are prohibited. The Gauteng legislature has agreed to make all public buildings gun free zones, and the idea spread to schools, churches, even shebeens in Soweto. It has influenced opinion makers, as evidenced by a number of editorials calling for the banning of private firearms, and promoted a gender lens by focusing on the links between militarism and masculinity. Until 2004 GFSA was led by a woman (Sheena Duncan) and was driven largely by women’s energy. ‘It is women who make the gun free zones happen’ (Kirsten interview).

While these three organisations – ECC, Ceasefire and GFSA – were the key nodes in the demilitarisation network, it must be stressed that this was not a tidy movement with neat edges and borders. It included a great diversity of women of different ages, classes, ideologies and marital statuses.

## The relation between feminism and militarism

Not all of these women claimed the identity of mothers and not all termed themselves ‘pacifists’ or ‘feminists’. According to Janet Cherry, ‘There were some pacifists but ECC wasn’t really a pacifist organisation. We didn’t link up with anti-war movements in other parts of the world. The militarisation issue was framed as being against the militarism of the apartheid state’ (Cherry interview). Her primary identity was always as an anti-apartheid activist.

Cherry defined herself as a ‘socialist-feminist’ and experienced it as a liberating identity as a student in the 1980s:

For me, adopting a consciously feminist identity was a liberating thing: body image ceased to be of great importance...nobody cared...but my primary identity was as a revolutionary, an activist tough and equal to my male counterparts in all respects. Without seeing the need to identify physically with male or female roles, to be ‘butch’ or ‘femme’, I could be both. I thought of myself as tough enough to run a printing press, drive pamphlets out to the townships at night, teach literacy to migrant workers in the hostels. At the same time I enjoyed being a strong woman, enjoying my own sexuality, enjoying relationships with men

where they were my comrades, my equals and we did not push each other around (or not much). (Cherry interview)

In Left student politics in the 1980s gender issues were not prioritised but ‘there was a clear understanding that sexist practices were unacceptable and a clear feminist identity which involved a rejection of women having to behave so as to please or catch men’ (Cherry interview).

By contrast, another ECC activist, Nan Cross, never defined herself as a feminist: ‘I never considered feminism to be important.’ She stressed that most women got involved in anti-militarisation work through relations with lovers or relatives threatened by conscription. ‘I was very affected by my nephew who was called up and struggled about what to do. It was a very painful struggle and he ended up in a psychiatric unit for a time.’ She rejected the identity of pacifist, ‘It’s too heavy a word’ (Cross interview).

Laura Pollicutt was one of several women interviewed who expressed feelings of ambivalence about the ANC’s commitment to armed struggle as one of their strategies for bringing about change. But many women had a deep loyalty to the ANC.

I defined myself as a pacifist and anti-militarist in student days, and so the heroisation of MK [Umkhonto we Sizwe] made me uncomfortable. My pacifism was overridden by ANC loyalties...many of us felt that our primary loyalty was to the ANC and we accepted that violence was a necessary means of overthrowing the apartheid regime. Peace was never an abstract ideology or goal. (Cherry interview)



'Militarism' was not generally defined as a 'women's issue' in the embryonic feminist theorising in South Africa at the time. The t-shirt emblazoned with the slogan 'Another mother for peace' was a strong statement of the ideology that links mothering to pacific, caring behaviour. Distributed by the Black Sash, it was worn proudly by a number of women at protests and demonstrations against the militarist violence of the apartheid state.

However, the commitment to a just peace took women in different political directions. There were women who said they joined the armed struggle and became active in MK precisely because they were mothers. For example, Thandi Modise asserted that she 'became a guerrilla because I'm a mother' (Cock 1991: 152).

Motherhood is probably the most contentious issue in feminist politics. As Luker points out, the abortion debate, for instance, is so passionate precisely 'because it is a referendum on the place and meaning of motherhood' (Luker 1984: 193). Feminists such as Ruddick (1989) and Elshtain (1981) have argued that motherhood involves special values such as care and nurturance, which should be projected into political life. Women's collective action inspired by their identities as mothers is what Kaplan (1997) has termed 'motherism'.

While 'motherhood' often confines women to a set of privatist, personalised concerns with their own families, for others 'motherhood' was an animating ideology which drew them into political struggles such as the demilitarisation network, as their activist children were detained or harassed.

On occasion the identity of 'mother' was used to deepen connections between black and white women involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. For example, addressing a meeting in the Regina Mudi church in Soweto in 1986 the chair of the Transvaal region of the Black Sash, Judith Hawarden, emphasised her pain as the mother of two sons likely to be conscripted into the SADF, a pain which resonated with the mothers of sons who volunteered to leave the country for military training with MK.

Another peace activist does define herself as a feminist and believes that:

Women are less likely to pick up a gun but they aren't innately more peaceful. The identity of mother can propel one into political action. Mothering can be a powerful impetus...When you've had a child, you want a better world for that child. Mothers were an important force in ECC. (Pollicott interview)

A younger feminist stressed that:

'Another mother for peace' was not an ECC slogan. Mothers are not more nurturing, but motherhood can be a mobilising message. The slogan connects with their experience and recognises their priority identity...Women have no innate ability as peace builders but we're taught to be facilitative, to be co-operative and conciliatory, to mediate in conflicts and these are all qualities which are useful to peacemaking. (Kirsten interview)

The relation between feminism and militarism is a complex one. In many societies women have played important roles in both public and private militarism, but this has been largely obscured and mystified by two competing perspectives – those of sexism and feminism. Both analyses are sometimes used to exclude women from war on the grounds that they are bearers of ‘special qualities’. Sexism excludes women from the military on the grounds of their physical inferiority and unsuitability for fighting. As the weaker sex women must be ‘protected’ and ‘defended’. A biologistic and essentialist feminism similarly excludes women but on opposite grounds, that of their innate nurturing qualities, their creativity and pacifism. Women are the ‘mothers of the race’, the ‘peace-loving sex’. For example, early this century the British feminist Vera Brittain asserted that if women had political power they would never let their children, whom they bear in anguish, go to war. ‘War violates a profound biological urge in women’ (1933: 60).

Similarly, Brittain’s contemporary, the South African feminist Olive Schreiner, argued that mothers have a special responsibility, as well as a special power to oppose war and militarism. She characterised a callousness towards life and death as ‘instinctual’ in men. ‘ “It is a fine day, let us go out and kill something,” cries the typical male of certain races, instinctively. “There is a living thing, it will die if it is not cared for,” says the average woman, almost equally instinctively’ (Schreiner 1911: 176).

In contrast to this kind of biological reductionism, Virginia Woolf argued in the great text of pacifist feminism, *Three Guineas* published in 1937, that men and women are different and men more drawn to bellicosity. But this is grounded in social relations rather than biology, in women’s exclusion from power and resources, from male-dominated institutions and values. In Woolf’s argument the prevention of war requires the dismantling of the entire gender system, the desegregation of male and female spheres, and the depolarisation of masculinity and femininity. Men would have to be emancipated from the notion that war was a necessary proving ground for ‘manly’ qualities (Woolf 1937). Her pacifist feminism sought equality between the sexes, not through admitting women to combat, but rather through liberating men from militarism.

The crucial point is that the demilitarisation network also contained women who rejected motherhood, women of very different ages, marital statuses and political understandings. A broad commitment to peace and justice took these women in very different political directions.

There were powerful women’s voices which were not always filtered through the organisational network. For example, Pregs Govender spoke out both in Parliament and in civil society initiatives. At a national conference in 1996 which included many Cabinet ministers, civil servants from all government departments as well as civil society, she asked ‘departments to put their money where their mouths are – to take away spending in defence on corvettes which cost R434 million each, submarines which cost R11.1 billion each and generals who cost R464.638 each year’ (Govender 2004: 8). Her ‘maiden speech’ to Parliament in 1994 raised the question of whether the

defence budget should be increased, in comparison to socio-economic needs, and she registered her opposition to the arms deal in the defence budget vote in 2001. Attacked in Parliament she resigned in 2002. Another powerful woman's voice was Gracia Machel's landmark study on the impact of armed conflict on children which addressed issues previously considered outside the domain of child rights, issues such as landmines and sanctions.

The demilitarisation network was only one component of the larger infrastructure of peace-building organisations in which one women's organisation played a crucial role – the Black Sash.

## A crucible in peace building: the Black Sash

Formed in 1955, this woman-only organisation engaged in a range of activities including lobbying, protests which involved silent stands by women draped in their black sashes, court monitoring and establishing advice offices to offer paralegal advice and assistance to thousands of black South Africans caught up in apartheid laws, particularly the pass laws and forced removals (Spink 1991). Its role in protest against the unjust laws of apartheid earned the comment from Nelson Mandela in his first speech to the expectant crowds on his release in 1990, 'The Black Sash was the conscience of white South Africa,' he said (Black Sash 2005: 7). Senior members of the Black Sash were subsequently among those invited to a celebration to honour their contribution to the liberation of South Africa.

While there was no coherent centre in the social infrastructure for peace building established during this period, the Black Sash played a crucial role in peace building, often initiating other campaigns and organisations such as Peace Action; the Transvaal Rural Action Committee, launched in 1983 to assist rural communities facing forced removals; and the Free the Children Campaign, launched in 1986. In 1983 the Black Sash made the first public call for the abolition of military conscription. 'It seemed like an idealistic call at the time but it galvanised action and contributed to the formation of the ECC' (Duncan interview). The social composition of ECC was 'mainly young, white and socially radical, and the Black Sash was a very important ally for us. It allowed us access to a different constituency, that of white, middle-class women many of whom were mothers' (Kirsten interview). But their identity as mothers was also used against their activism. According to Sheena Duncan, 'In the 1960s we were labelled as communists and were shouted at and told we ought to be at home in our kitchens looking after our children' (Black Sash 2005: 2).

But even earlier the Black Sash had presented a model of women mobilising. According to ex-national President Sheena Duncan, the famous 1956 march of 20 000 women to Pretoria to protest against passes was, according to at least one of her informants, inspired by the Black Sash mass action in Pretoria in 1955. In that year the



Sheena Duncan of the Black Sash addresses a public meeting hosted by the Black Sash, UDF affiliate JODAC, ECC and the SACC.

which was taken up by Lawyers for Human Rights and played an important part in broader structures such as the National Women's Coalition. Several campaigns had a strong focus on children and protests included some dramatic actions such as the 'Peace ribbon' and a 1985 march on the Protea Police Station in Soweto to protest the detention of African children as young as six years. Many individual members helped to strengthen underground resistance and promote non-racialism through prison visits to activists detained without trial, providing support during trials, attending funerals and numerous public protest actions.

While the organisation was committed to the principle of non-violence, there were tensions around the issue of resistance violence and necklacing in particular, but overall it was a strong cohesive organisation:

[It] was full of strong, independent women but many of them didn't call themselves feminists. It was never a feminist organisation. Women's rights were mostly seen as secondary to the struggle against apartheid. As that struggle accelerated this changed. Women like Barbara Klugman brought up the abortion issue and after 1994 it contained a very strong feminist group who, among other things, lobbied to get women involved in the negotiations and elected to transitional institutions like the Independent Electoral Commission and the SABC [South African Broadcasting Corporation] board. (Pollicott interview)

In addition to the t-shirt 'Another mother for peace', the Black Sash produced an apron – 'A woman's place is in the struggle, not the kitchen' – which was a popular item at the Black Sash annual morning market.

The Black Sash is exceptional in civil society generally for the fact that it has existed for 50 years and has transformed itself in the process. The transformation includes a shift from a whites only, membership-based organisation to a national non-governmental organisation (NGO) staffed by 48 mainly black professionals committed to the slogan 'Making human rights real'. It continues to play a crucial role in exposing injustice. Under apartheid it did so in relation to the pass laws, forced removals and the

Women's Defence of the Constitution League (the precursor of the Black Sash) organised a mass meeting in Johannesburg, a march of some 1 000 women followed by a vigil at the Union Buildings in Pretoria to oppose the Bill to remove 'coloured' voters from the common voters' roll, and a convoy to Cape Town (Black Sash 2005; Rogers 1956). The Black Sash also pioneered a campaign against capital punishment, a campaign

migrant labour system and, since 1994, in its focus on poverty and the failure of the post-apartheid state to realise the socio-economic rights enshrined in the Constitution. Throughout its 50-year history the organisation has remained grounded in the advice offices which operate throughout the country, now serving some 18 000 people each year. As the majority (61 per cent in 2004) of these are women, the organisation has also adopted a more prominent gender lens. Grounded at the coalface of its advice office work, the organisation is very involved in advocacy, particularly for legislation that ensures gender equity, and promoting awareness of the feminisation of poverty. While not adopting an explicitly feminist discourse, the organisation argues that this process ‘demands an increased feminisation of policy direction’ (Black Sash 2005: 57).

## Other women's peace-building initiatives

Following is information about other important peace-building initiatives in the period under review, all of which were either driven by women or involved significant numbers of women.

### The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

This was established in 1989 and contributed significantly to peace building, employing some 65 people (of whom 48 are women) and managing a budget of R20 million per annum. It ‘works to prevent violence in all its forms, heal its effects, and build sustainable peace and reconciliation in South Africa and internationally’ (CSVR 2003: 15). Through research, advocacy interventions and community-based programmes they do important work with ex-combatants and victim empowerment. For instance, in 2003 they conducted 3 000 counselling sessions with trauma victims.

### The Centre for Conflict Resolution

The Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) was established in 1989, and has undertaken important policy advocacy and capacity-building work, particularly through the Southern African Military Information project (formerly the Arms Watch project), which collected and disseminated information and analysis on the arms trade, defence production and military expenditure. This was linked to the CCR project on peace and security which undertook academic and policy research on defence and security issues in South and southern Africa. Their work on conflict resolution had a significant impact, largely through the extraordinary energy and abilities of a handful of individuals. The impact of an organisation such as CCR was evident not only in attempts to build capacity in civil society, but also in their research (specifically their investigations during the Cameron Commission) and their policy recommendations on new arms control measures and institutions.

## Peace Action

Peace Action was an independent organisation in the PWV area, monitoring violence and assisting victims of violence. Initiated by the Black Sash, this organisation was largely but not exclusively driven by women:

Most importantly they exposed the Boipatong massacre, which was a very important moment. It exposed the third force. Women like Audrey Coleman and Sister Sheila Mary were crucial in exposing the violence, taking statements from victims, getting media attention. (Pollecutt interview)

## Other initiatives

- The Defence and Development Project of the Group for Environmental Monitoring (GEM). In addition to pioneering work on military bases, it contributed importantly to capacity building in civil society by running workshops on the arms industry.
- People Opposing Woman Abuse provides emotional support, information and practical assistance to women who have experienced rape, violence and sexual harassment.
- The Centre for Peace Action, based in Eldorado park in Johannesburg, aims to assist survivors of violence.
- The National Peace Accord established offices in 11 regions.
- COSG, formed in 1979.
- The Military Research Group – co-chaired by a woman.
- The Coalition for Peace in Africa.
- The Peace and Development Platform was formed in 2002 from some 40 NGOs from sub-Saharan Africa to ‘build a long-term broad coalition, network or alliance to promote the issues of peace, demilitarisation and justice’ (*Ceasefire Anti-War News* August 2002).
- The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD).
- The Quaker Peace Centre.
- The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church.

Many of these organisations were linked – either formally in relation to specific campaigns, or informally – with the key nodes of the demilitarisation network.

## Characteristics of the social infrastructure for peace building

The social infrastructure for peace building was characterised by a radical decentralisation of authority, with no governing body, official ideology or mandated leaders, minimum hierarchy and horizontal forms of organising. It was a realm of dynamic and

complex interactions. In addition the social infrastructure for peace building was marked by the following characteristics:

### **Organisational diversity and social bonds**

There was a multiplicity of organisational expressions – an organisational diversity operating through loose, decentralised networks or ‘meshworks’. This diversity encompassed women of very different ages, marital statuses and political understandings.

The network was dense; it contained pockets of strong, personal relations marked by long-term commitments. The social bonds among participants were what Tarrow (2003) terms ‘embedded networks’ rather than ‘contingent alliances’ which are short term and instrumental. For many activists social interactions had a depth and intensity that contrasted with the ‘thin’ atomised identities of citizen and consumer. In this sense new images of solidarity and connectedness were disseminated. The dense nature of the relationships within this loose network was evident in the connections with a range of other organisations.

### **Range of activities**

All the organisations engaged in a wide repertoire of activities, including lobbying (eg. GFSA), placard demonstrations, protests (eg. ECC, Black Sash), research (GEM on military bases), public petitions, marches, use of media, conflict mediation (eg. CCR), support for conscientious objectors (eg. COSG), media exposure and so on. Some strategies were dramatic. On one occasion a group of heavily armed security guards looked bemused at the sight of a diminutive, grey-haired woman climbing onto the armoured tank. The occasion was the arms industry exhibition in Johannesburg in 1998 and 70-year-old peace activist Nan Cross was fixing the sticker ‘Arms are for hugging, not killing’ onto all the military hardware she could reach.

### **Coalitions and alliances**

All the organisations demonstrated the power of building coalitions and alliances with diverse groups and structures which had political and geographical reach. Geographically these initiatives were spread throughout the country; politically they reached down into grassroots communities and up into elite institutions.

### **Unrepresentative character**

Many of these initiatives were characterised by a social shallowness in the sense that they had no strong connections to or deep penetration into mass-based movements; white, English-speaking professionals dominated. This unrepresentative character, plus the lack of capacity for mass mobilisation, was a major weakness.

## **Finances**

Most of these organisational initiatives were small in terms of numbers of paid staff, membership and budgets. Many organisational initiatives were donor dependent. Overseas funding was critical, particularly from the European Union, North American foundations and Scandinavian countries.

## **Global connections**

Many organisations developed increasing global connections. Whereas much of the literature on peace building emphasises the role of indigenous actors, international organisations were also significant in strengthening local initiatives. During the period under review there was an embryonic but growing ‘global civil society’ constituted by NGO networks and alliances across the globe (Taylor 2004). Several local organisations were involved in various international campaigns which involved north–south partnerships, such as the Hague Appeal for Peace which brought together 8 000 people from 100 different countries in May 1999, and the Year 2000 Campaign to Redirect World Military Spending to Human Development. ‘Many of us have a sense of being part of a moral community, backed by a huge international movement...we are not alone’ (Kirsten interview).

## **Urban bias**

Many of these organisational initiatives were largely urban biased, being located in the larger cities throughout the country.

## **Leadership**

Leadership of these initiatives depended on a small number of visionary individuals. Many of these visionary leaders seemed to be sustained by a sense of their own potential efficacy: ‘I have a deep belief that I as an individual can make a difference...The anti-apartheid struggle gave us a sense of being able to alter the course of human history’ (Kirsten interview).

## **Geographic reach**

The spectrum of initiatives included organisations of very different scope and size, from those concerned with peace at the local and community levels, to those focusing on the national and regional levels. However, the geographic reach of many of these initiatives expanded through structures like ACCORD and the Coalition for Peace in Africa, a network of organisations from 15 different countries in sub-Saharan Africa established in 1996.

## The role of the church

The church was a significant social space for many of these organisational peace-building and demilitarisation initiatives. It provided a social infrastructure that had the potential to reach deep into grassroots communities and link local peace efforts to national and international processes. Military activities such as arms exports and conscription evoked statements of condemnation from churches, particularly the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. This was a powerful voice articulating an integrated vision linking peace and justice.

For many women the church provided a space which transformed their political understandings. ‘My political consciousness deepened through my involvement in the Methodist church. Tutu organised an overseas trip of young church people in 1980 and this was the first time I engaged with black people my age who challenged me’ (Kirsten interview).

## Holistic approach

Many of the organisational initiatives had a comprehensive, holistic approach that involved redefining issues to create the framework for coalition building.

## Participants

Participants included a diversity of women of different ages, marital statuses, ideological understandings and commitments.

## The impact of peace-building initiatives

Adopting a ‘positive’ or holistic conception of peace that is historically informed and located in the South African reality, this chapter has outlined – in very broad terms – the existence of a spectrum of organisational peace initiatives which provided a supportive infrastructure for peace building, including initiatives which promoted demilitarisation.

While the question of impact is an extremely difficult one, it is possible to identify the following policy and institutional impacts of the demilitarisation network:

### New policy formulation

- The South African White Paper on Defence was a landmark document which promoted a new, non-militarist and non-statist conception of security. The White Paper incorporated work done by the CCR director as part of the Military Research Group which was active in South Africa between 1990 and 1994, and articulated new principles of defence which facilitated the development of a shared understanding between leaders of the SADF and MK. Without this shared

understanding South Africa's transition to democracy might have involved more violence.

- New policy on military land and environmental issues and specifically base closures.

## Institutional impacts

- New institutions such as The National Arms Control Committee.
- New mechanisms of conflict mediation and resolution.
- A programme for the reintegration of ex-combatants into society through the provision of access to training, employment and supportive social networks.
- The abolition of a racially exclusive conscription. By 1993, less than 20 per cent of those called up actually reported for service, and prosecutions of objectors had largely ceased (De Villiers 1993: 4).
- New agencies for the rehabilitation of victims of violence and militarisation, through the provision of trauma counselling.
- New controls over guns and the destruction of light weapons, particularly landmines and surplus state holdings of small arms.

## Social reconstructions

Demilitarisation is only one element in the jigsaw of peace building. This chapter has focused on peace as one component of the process of social reconstruction of war-torn societies. This is the key to understanding the impact of peace-building organisations. Through the provision of a supportive infrastructure the organisational peace initiatives described above contributed to this *process of social reconstruction* through:

- Exposing different forms and perpetrators of violence. For example, some analysts have emphasised the positive impact of monitoring in the South African transition to democracy (Benni et al. 1998).
- Weakening the notion that violence in some form or other is natural, inevitable and ineluctably present in human affairs.
- Reconfiguring the discourse on peace and projecting a new understanding of security which was linked to development, as well as a vision of an alternative non-violent social order. The key elements here are social justice, democratisation, development, morality and non-violent conflict resolution.
- Promoting alternative identities, which emphasised human rights, tolerance of difference and reconciliation. This was done largely through challenging the conception of racial and ethnic identities as fixed, essentialist and antagonistic. The construction of non-racial democratic politics operated to transform understandings of conflicts away from racial ones. Many peace-building organisations promoted informal interpersonal 'contact' and staff demonstrated non-racialism in their micro-practice.

- Providing bridges – points of humanising contact – between different racial, ethnic and ideological groupings.
- Promoting healing of those who have experienced brutal and traumatic violence; crucial to establishing peace and reconciliation.
- Presenting alternatives to the apartheid regime – an alternative order marked by equality, human rights, dignity, tolerance, dialogue and negotiation.
- Articulating alternative racial, national and gender identities. Particularly important here were new models of citizenship, breaking the national service discourse which tied military service to full citizenship for white men.
- Contributing to the demise of the apartheid regime. Addressing the 1993 ECC Peace Festival Nelson Mandela said, ‘Your campaign against conscription put you firmly on the side of the democratic forces and contributed considerably to the overall efforts of the people of South Africa to overthrow racial oppression. It is your principled struggle, and those of the masses of the people of our country and the international community, that forced the apartheid regime to negotiate’ (Mandela 1993: 7).

## Conclusion

Women’s role in this process, in peace building and specifically in the demilitarisation network which operated between the establishment of ECC in 1983 and 2003, has not always been appropriately acknowledged. Their courage was undeniable. The issues they confronted – whether military service, the private ownership of firearms or the arms industry – often evoked strong hostile responses from the apartheid state. Many of these defiant and committed women were subject to punitive sanctions ranging from detention in solitary confinement to ostracism and verbal abuse.

Not all of these women defined themselves as feminists but for many feminists a priority for peace building was that the connection between militarism and masculinity must be ruptured. Peace involves the social reconstruction of masculinity to sever its associations with violence and subjugation.

This is the challenge posed most sharply by Virginia Woolf 60 years ago when she asked, ‘How can we alter the crest and spur of the fighting cock?’ It is also the challenge posed by the American feminist poet Elizabeth Bishop in her anti-militarist poem ‘Roosters’, first titled ‘The Cock’. Bishop’s motive – she told her mentor, Marianne Moore – was ‘to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism’ (MacMahon 1980: 153). Both Bishop and Woolf also pointed to female complicity in the militarism–masculinity nexus, despite being, as Bishop expressed it, ‘wives who led hen’s lives of being courted and despised’ (MacMahon 1980: 203).

Challenges to this militarist masculinity have taken very different forms, including women joining armed formations. Some of the women who have joined the post-apartheid army, the SANDF, have done so intending to ‘consolidate democracy and

contribute to peace'. The SANDF now has a total strength of 76 000 and contains significant numbers of women. According to the Department of Defence's 2003–04 annual report, 21.7 per cent of members of the department are women, of whom 48.4 per cent are African.

Given this complexity of motivations one of the most significant peace-building initiatives by women was the African Women's Peace Table, launched in Pretoria in August 2000, which brought together over 100 women and some men from civil society and from the SANDF to consult on women's role in peace under the leadership of a pacifist woman, the then Deputy Minister of Defence, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge.

The rationale behind the concept of a 'peace table' was that women traditionally have the function of placing food on the table and this symbolises their role in maintaining households, families and communities throughout Africa. Intense discussion focused on defining 'peace' and relating it to the principles of defence on which the Department of Defence is structured. It was hoped that the African Women's Peace Table would strengthen women's capacities to contribute to peacemaking, peace-keeping and peace building in various capacities – as political leaders, as women in military structures, as women active in peace-building organisations, as mothers and wives, and as citizens.

The ideology of motherhood was one animating theme in the period under review, but it was an ideology that inspired very different political choices. This chapter has stressed women's commitment to peace building, acknowledging that the commitment to peace took them in different political directions. Peace activists were active in ECC, Ceasefire, GFSA and other organisational initiatives, but other women expressed their commitment to a just peace through joining the ANC and becoming active in MK. Since the formation of a new national army, women have become involved in SANDF peace-keeping operations.

Peacekeeping is a way to help countries torn by conflict to create conditions for sustainable peace. UN peacekeepers in the form of soldiers and military officers, civilian police officers and civilian personnel from many countries monitor and observe peace processes in post-conflict situations and assist ex-combatants to implement the peace agreements they have signed. Such assistance comes in many forms, including confidence-building measures, power-sharing arrangements, electoral support, strengthening the rule of law, and economic and social development. Since the UN 'blue helmets' won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988, they have helped to bring peace to Namibia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique and East Timor. They have acted as stabilising factors in conflicts as diverse as the Golan Heights, Sierra Leone, Cyprus, Georgia, Western Sahara and Kosovo.

The SANDF has been involved in peacekeeping operations in Mozambique, the Ivory Coast, Sudan, the DRC and Burundi. All of the 3 000 personnel involved in these operations have included women. For example, women were part of the first African Union

peacekeeping mission, the African Union Mission in Burundi, which included 2 870 troops from South Africa, Ethiopia and Mozambique. They helped guarantee the political settlement by providing protection to high-level politicians, and overseeing the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of the Hutu fighters. A later expanded programme included running camps, securing convoys and protecting Bujumbura airport. The secretary-general of the UN has called on member states to increase the recruitment of women as military observers, peacekeeping groups and civilian police.

But while women are increasingly active in peace building and peacekeeping, there was an empty space in the peace process if that is understood as a continuum stretching from peacemaking to peacekeeping and peace building. The gap is the absence of women from peacemaking – the negotiations to end violent conflict. This applies both in South Africa and much of the world. The need for change was recognised in the Beijing Platform for Action 1995 statement that, ‘Equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflict are essential for the maintenance of peace and security.’ It was even more clearly expressed in the resolution on Women, Peace and Security adopted unanimously by the UN Security Council on 31 October 2000.

It follows that at the global, national and local levels efforts must be increased to achieve such ‘full participation’ of women in the future and to acknowledge and give voice to the experiences and contributions of women to past struggles.

#### NOTE

- 1 The research on which this chapter is based involved a literature review of selected secondary sources, interviews with key informants active in peace-building initiatives and organisations, participant observation through my own involvement in the Black Sash, ECC, GFSA and Ceasefire, as well as analysis of selected primary documentary sources.

#### REFERENCES

- Benni A, Minnaar A & Pretorius S (1998) Persistent collective violence and early warning systems: The case of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Armed Forces and Society*, 24(4): 501–518.
- Black Sash (2005) *Black Sash 1955–2005: Golden Jubilee Report*. Cape Town: The Black Sash.
- Brittain V (1933) *Diaries and letters 1914–1918*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Cock J (1989) Conscription in South Africa: A study in the politics of coercion. *South African Sociological Review*, 12(1): 1–22.
- Cock J (1990) The role of violence in current state security strategies. In M Swilling (ed) *Views on the South African state*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Cock J (1991) *Colonels and cadres: War and gender in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Cock J (2005) Guards and guns: Towards privatised militarism in post-apartheid South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31(4), December: 791–804.
- Conway D (2005) Masculinity, citizenship and political objection to military service in apartheid South Africa. In A Gouws (ed) *Unthinking citizenship: Feminist debates in contemporary South Africa*. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- CSVR (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation) (2003) *Annual Report*. Johannesburg: CSVR.
- De Villiers C (1993) Welcome and introduction to the ECC 1993 Peace Festival. *ECC Peace Festival Report*. Johannesburg: ECC.
- Elshtain JB (1981) *Public man, private woman*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Gordon L (1987) Nazi feminists. *Feminist Review*, 27: 34–46.
- Govender P (2004) The politics of love and courage. Ruth First memorial lecture, Johannesburg.
- Grundy K (1987) *The militarisation of South African politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaplan T (1997) *Crazy for democracy; women in grassroots movements*. New York: Routledge.
- Luker K (1984) *Abortion and the politics of motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- MacMahon C (1980) *Elizabeth Bishop*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Mandela N (1993) Keynote address to the ECC 1993 Peace Festival. *ECC Peace Festival Report*, 7. Johannesburg: ECC.
- Nathan L (1989) Marching to a different beat: The history of the end conscription campaign. In J Cock & L Nathan (Eds) *War and society: The militarisation of South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Nathan L (1998) Good governance, security and disarmament: The challenge of demilitarisation in Africa. Unpublished paper.
- Rogers M (1956) *The Black Sash*. Johannesburg: Rotonews.
- Ruddick S (1989) *Maternal thinking: Towards a politics of peace*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Saucier G (1998) Gender and peacebuilding. Paper for policy discussion.
- Schreiner O (1911) *Women and labour*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Spink K (1991) *Black Sash: The beginning of a bridge for South Africa*. London: Methuen.
- Tarrow S (2003) *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor R (ed) (2004) *Creating a better world: Interpreting global civil society*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Walker C (1995) Conceptualizing motherhood in twentieth century South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21(3): 417–437.
- Wells J (1998) The rise and fall of motherism as a force in black women's resistance. Paper read at Women and Gender in Southern Africa Conference, University of Natal, Durban.
- Woolf V (1937) *Three guineas*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

## INTERVIEWS

- Cherry Janet, Port Elizabeth, 25 April 2005.
- Cross Nan, Johannesburg, 2 May 2005.
- Duncan Sheena, Johannesburg, 28 July 2005.
- Kirsten Adele, Johannesburg, 10 May 2005.
- Pollicott Laura, Johannesburg, 6 May 2005.
- Spielberg Heike, Johannesburg, 5 July 2003.

# 'We were not afraid': The role of women in the 1980s' township uprising in the Eastern Cape

JANET CHERRY

A memory: We are women, marching together, hundreds of women, defiant and united against the surrounding police. Marching at the front of the funeral procession, fearless in the face of impending police action. Suddenly, there are explosions as tear-gas canisters are fired directly into the front of the march. Women fall to their knees, overcome by the blinding gas. We crawl out of the confusion of bodies and dust. Women in the houses lining the dusty township street shepherd us into their yards; they help us with water, cloths, Vaseline for our eyes. We regroup, eyes streaming, clothes torn, and make our way to the church for yet another funeral.

## Women now playing leading role

By JIMMY MATYU  
AN executive member of the Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation (Pewo), Mrs Virginia Ngalo said at a mass funeral in New Brighton yesterday that women were playing a leading role in the present situation because they were tired of collecting the bodies of their children from the mortuaries.

She was addressing a packed Church of Christ, where a funeral organised by Pewo for four unrest victims was held.

Mrs Ngalo said the women had come to show that the killing of their young people was no longer tolerated.

Women now take the unusual step of organising and conducting a funeral because they wanted to prove the truth about who provoked incidents in the relationships between the so-called stone-throws and the police.

"When our sons are killed, it is always said that they may have been throwing stones and petrol bombs at the armed police," she said.

The women were now prepared to die in those instances where their sons were killed.

"We thank all the white women with us here because they have shown us that they are feeling the same pain that we are feeling as our children, as they would be their own," she said.

Miss Janet Cherry, a member of the End Conscription Campaign, who expressed solidarity with black women, said it was a privilege for the white women to feel the pain the black women were feeling.

She blamed the Government for violence in the townships.

Miss Cherry summed up the feelings of the



## Tearsmoke, chaos at PE funeral

By JIMMY MATYU

A PHAYEK SERVICE at a market site in Tshamana Street, New Brighton, and a march afterwards to the church of Christ A to the funeral service for four unrest victims were disrupted when police fired tearsmoke and a police officer had given the marchers a minute to disperse.

It was necessary in some cases to use fire hoses.

The entry of the church

police firing tearsmoke and fire hoses.

Before the service was over at the church, thousands of mourners had congregated outside the cemetery to protest the arrival of the coffin carrying the bodies of Mr Elvin Zuma, 44, Mr Thabo Mbeki, 44, Mr Solly Nongqayi and Queenie Dlamini, 15.

It was necessary in some cases to use fire hoses.

The entry of the church

police firing tearsmoke and fire hoses.

Thousands of mourners

had gathered outside the

church to protest the arrival

of the coffin carrying the

bodies of Mr Elvin Zuma,

44, Mr Thabo Mbeki, 44, Mr Solly Nongqayi and Queenie Dlamini, 15.

## Why women organised the funeral

By JIMMY MATYU

MRS VIRGINIA NGALO, an executive member of the Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation (Pewo), said at a mass funeral in New Brighton yesterday that women were playing a leading role because they were tired of collecting bodies of their children from the mortuaries.

She was addressing a packed Church of Christ, where a funeral organised by Pewo for four unrest victims was held.

Ms Ngalo said the men aimed to show the killing of their people was no longer tolerable.

Women had taken the

unusual step of organising

conducting a funeral

because they wanted to

prove the truth about who

provoked incidents in the

prepared to die where their sons were killed.

"We thank all the white women with us here because they have shown us that they are feeling the same pain that we are feeling about our children, as they would for their own," she said.

Miss Janet Cherry, a member of the End Conscription Campaign, who expressed solidarity with black women, said it was a privilege for the white women to feel the pain the black women were feeling.

She blamed the Government for violence in the townships.

Miss Cherry assured

mourners that a conscientious objector, Mr Philip Wilkinson, of Port Elizabeth, would not be reporting for his camp call-up on April 28. She criticised

bogus narratives.

One of the thousands of such funerals held in townships all over South Africa in the period 1985 to 1987: ‘unrest’ funerals, so-called by the police, where the victims of police action during that period of township uprising, as we prefer to call it, were buried. At these funerals, thousands of furious young comrades engaged in reckless actions against police and collaborators; police retaliated with even greater brutality; and more died. The cycle of violence continued for two or three years. Thousands of our comrades, most of them young men, died. Hundreds of alleged collaborators were killed by these same comrades, often in extremely brutal ways. In this process, during the ‘emergency years’ of the mid-1980s, the townships became ungovernable; apartheid was rendered unworkable.

Underlying these images and memories of violent confrontation, of police torture, hordes of angry youth chanting, of mob vengeance, of funeral after funeral – underlying these images of defiance is a network of organisation, a multiplicity of strategies of mobilisation, an enormous wealth of tactical creativity and personal resilience which arose in the townships in this period.

In the cities of Port Elizabeth and East London, as well as in small towns such as Cradock, Grahamstown and Port Alfred, the early 1980s saw the growth of local, sectoral or interest-based organisations. These organisations – student, youth, civic and women’s organisations – were part of a bigger political project of the national liberation movement, under the leadership of the ANC. This political project embraced a strategy of mobilisation of the masses around their particular interests, and linked this grass-roots mobilisation into the broader struggle for national liberation. Thus it formed one of the ANC’s four pillars of struggle, the other three being the armed struggle, the campaign for international isolation of the South African government, and the building of an underground which would link the internal and external movements.

In the mid-1980s, the mass movement came increasingly into violent confrontation with the apartheid state, and what came to be described as the ‘township uprising’ engulfed black communities in the period from 1984 to 1989. This brief period of five or so years can be seen as a turning point in South African history: while the apartheid state contained the revolt and effectively confined it to the townships, it could not gain the legitimacy necessary to ensure economic and political stability. It was out of this impasse that the negotiations for a democratic South Africa began.

And yet, in all the vast literature of the uprising of the mid-1980s, there is scarcely a word written about the role played by women in this decisive period of struggle. Seekings (1991) notes that his survey of the literature on the 1980s’ uprising shows that gender issues are simply ignored, with fewer than ten of 500 works focusing primarily on struggles of women. Most academics and journalists have used ‘gender-blind categories’ to describe township protest: terms such as ‘the people’, ‘youth’, ‘community’, ‘residents’ and ‘masses’. Hassim also notes that, besides Ineke van Kessel’s book, in the literature on the civic movement of the 1980s there is ‘no discussion...of women’s role in the civics or of women’s organisations in alliance with the civics’ (2003: 49).

While there is obviously a need for ‘gender corrective’ history, and the reinsertion of women’s role in political struggle is a valid intellectual project in its own right, it is hoped here to go beyond this need. Rather than simply ‘putting women into’ the existing histories, asserting their strength as mothers, their courage as fighters, their sensitivity as political leaders, we need to look critically at how women participated in these struggles. The ‘gender-blind’ accounts of these struggles reflect not only on their authors, but on the way in which the participants often assumed that ‘the struggle’ itself was ‘gender-blind’ and so consistently blurred distinctions between women’s struggles, community struggles and the national liberation struggle. This chapter thus focuses on the participation and role of women in the strategy of mass mobilisation and in the building of grassroots organisation. It focuses not on women’s organisations *per se*, but on women’s political role in the struggles of the 1980s – both in building ‘sectoral’ organisations for women, and in participating in other organisations, grassroots structures and struggles of the time.<sup>1</sup>

## **Women’s organisational role and the building of Congress hegemony**

### **The growth of ‘political women’s organisations’**

By the mid-1980s, explicitly political women’s organisations had been formed in all the major centres of South Africa. Jaffee noted that:

African working class women have also emerged as a powerful force for change within their communities. As popular resistance intensified in the past few years, working class women increasingly formed and participated in women’s organisations which played a major role in progressive politics. From 1980 onwards, women’s political organisations re-emerged in most South African black communities. (1987: 76)

Women began forming organisations in the early 1980s as part of a broad liberation movement strategy to organise people around their local grievances and needs. In the Western Cape, the United Women’s Organisation (UWO) was formed in 1980–81; in 1986 it merged with the Women’s Front to form the United Women’s Congress (UWCO). The Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) was formed in 1983, and aimed to organise women around ‘issues that most affect their lives – the high cost of living, poor housing, maternity benefits and childcare’ (Jaffee 1987: 84). Beginning with branches in Durban, it expanded to rural areas and other parts of the province. The Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDRAW) in turn was established in 1984, to ‘unite women in common action for the removal of political, legal, social and economic disabilities’ (Jaffee 1987: 85). FEDRAW was overtly organised in the tradition of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) of the 1950s.

Port Elizabeth was one of the areas where the ANC Women's League and the FEDSAW had been particularly active in the 1950s (Cherry 2003). Hence it was not surprising that women should form an organisation in the early 1980s, at the time of the revival or formation of other sectoral, mass-based organisations. These organisations, particularly the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO) in Port Elizabeth, were formed in response to the need to organise around conditions at the time – and yet were also given direction by the ANC's underground networks from the 'forward area' of Lesotho in particular.

The Ford strike of 1979, the formation of PEBCO, and its struggles around rentals and housing conditions are well documented; its initial period of organisation came to an end with the departure into exile of the charismatic Thozamile Botha. After a few years, it was resuscitated consciously as a 'Charterist' organisation, with the involvement of the 'old guard' of ANC activists in Port Elizabeth – the ex-Robben Islanders and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) veterans such as Henry Fazzie and Ernest Malgas. What is less well known is that women began to organise, initially under the banner of PEBCO, into a 'women's committee'. Ivy Gcina, who was on the PEBCO executive, met up with Buyiswa Siwisa (now Buyiswa Fazzie, married to MK veteran Henry Fazzie); together they began to revive the idea of women's organisation. They insisted that this be a public, non-racial women's organisation in the tradition of FEDSAW.

As Ivy Gcina explained, there was some division around how public and open such women's organisation could be. Many of the older generation of women activists had been involved in the ANC Women's League, and saw this new organisation as an ANC structure. Yet with their experience of the repression of the 1960s, it did not seem possible to openly organise as the ANC Women's League or as FEDSAW. Thus, before the launch of the Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation (PEWO), the executive split around this very issue: of the 13-member executive, six were in favour of a public women's organisation, but they were outvoted.

One of the veterans of the 1950s, Ntutu Mabhala, confirmed this. She had been a militant activist who had participated in the 1956 march to Pretoria, and had been one of the first women to join the MK underground in the early 1960s in the Eastern Cape. She joined PEWO, but she and another fellow veteran, Adelaide Mabude, were not elected to the first executive. This was a tactical move to prevent PEWO from immediately being identified as a front for the ANC Women's League. Ma Mabhala felt that the first chairperson was 'too timid' in her approach (Mabhala interview).

Ivy Gcina, meanwhile, had asked her son who was in Cape Town to contact the women's organisation there – the UWO – which was organised as a non-racial, 'Charterist' organisation in the FEDSAW tradition. With the support of Dorothy Zihlangu, and the assistance of women activists from Cape Town, Gcina and others went ahead with the launch of the PEWO in November 1983. Gcina was then elected as the chairperson, and became one of the most articulate and militant women leaders in

the Eastern Cape. Gcina was one of a relatively small group of middle-aged women who were able to take up leadership positions in the 1980s' uprising. Known by her clan name as 'MamSukwini', her life in her middle age became entirely devoted to the struggle for liberation. Closely connected to the ANC in exile, three of her sons joined MK, with two of them dying in combat in the 1980s and a third meeting his death in a tragic accident in exile. After Gcina took over as chairperson, veteran Ma Mabhala was co-opted as an executive member; she noted that 'the 1980s was hard compared to earlier years, the 1950s' (Mabhala interview). Noluthando Ngoma, another of the PEWO leaders in her forties, was under no illusions about the nature of PEWO and other United Democratic Front (UDF) structures:

When the UDF was formed as a directive from the late president OR Tambo while he was in exile, I joined it because I knew it was a front for the ANC. PEWO was also formed as a wing of the UDF, whose leader was Cde Gcina. (Ngoma interview)

When Gcina was detained, Ngoma was co-opted as deputy chairperson of PEWO.

Meanwhile, before repression intensified, Gcina obtained assistance from the director of the Urban Foundation, Roger Matlock, in securing offices in the Enkhuthazweni Community Centre in Kwazakele, and in obtaining sewing machines. PEWO then organised for the sewing of 'uniforms' according to the ANC Women's League tradition – the green blouses with black collars that were to clearly indicate their allegiance and their history.

COSAS, meanwhile, had built a militant and dynamic organisation based at high schools, and in 1982–83 the 'directive' came from Lusaka for youth organisations to be established. This was a national strategy and, in the Eastern Cape, the Port Elizabeth Youth Congress (PEYCO) was one of the first youth congresses to be founded. Many of the younger women activists became involved firstly as scholars in COSAS, or in PEYCO as youth. From there they began to get involved in other structures including PEWO. These young women activists saw as one of the crucial roles of PEWO the 'bridging of the gap' between parents and youth; as they explained, the older women – the 'mothers' – were reluctant to engage in political organisation, clung to church structures and the singing of hymns, and were even hostile to the militant strategies of their children, such as school boycotts. PEWO members would try to convince the 'mothers' about the importance of school boycotts, trying to explain the need for political organisation and resistance, and support for their children in the pursuance of their political objectives. The younger women in PEWO also played a proactive role in organising the school boycotts, and during the 1984 boycott they went around to the township schools to check whether the boycott was being adhered to. One activist recalled her experience of being a student at Ikwezi Lomso High School – how women students were afraid to join COSAS, and how they set up a separate women's section of COSAS to encourage women students to join. When the schools boycott started, these women were at the forefront of enforcing the boycott:

This was at the time of the 1984 schools boycott: Ntombomzi and others were involved. Some of the Standard 10 students were reluctant to boycott. But I was also in Standard 10, sacrificing my own studies. We met at St Stephens Church, took a hosepipe, and sprayed the students inside the classroom so that they would come out. (Group discussion)

Another such young woman was Fikiswa Gaveni, who had been a COSAS activist from 1980 to 1985, and after completing her matric was elected to be a ‘full-time organiser for women in COSAS’ (Gaveni interview). In around 1984 she was elected onto the executive of PEWO, along with two other young women, Nontobeko Madlala and Mpumi Lutywantsi. She notes that at that time, there was only one other young woman – Smally Maqungo – who was involved in PEWO. It seems that the PEBCO leadership was concerned that PEWO was too ‘staid’ in its approach, and there was a deliberate effort to ‘inject’ PEWO with the militant politics of the youth:

That was the advice from Comrade Hashe and other PEBCO executive members. Their aim was to inject the structure. They wanted the structure to be more politically involved. (Gaveni interview)

These young women activists were concerned initially with political education but, as in Cradock, they did not exclude the veterans of FEDSAW. Instead, they consciously drew on their political history to emphasise the continuity between the Congress tradition of the 1950s and the new organisations of the 1980s:

With PEWO I would say we did a great job. We managed to organise workshops, group discussions, organised stalwarts of the FEDSAW such as Ma Mabude, Ma Tshaka and Ma Mabhala to share with us their experiences in working with women. (Gaveni interview)

We used to go to Ma Machete’s place every Sunday, and learn about the history of organisation in the 1950s. (Group discussion)

Perhaps the most crucial task of PEWO – at least initially – was understood to be the building of ‘Congress hegemony’ in the African townships of Port Elizabeth. They revived the Congress tradition through the holding of workshops where they taught other women about the ‘role of women in the liberation struggle’, and gave accounts of the historic role of women in opposing the extension of pass laws in 1956. They consulted with the veterans of the 1950s, such as Hilda Tshaka and Ntutu Mabhala, ensuring continuity of the Congress tradition despite the difficulty of being openly supportive of the ANC. The PEWO activists, young and old, explained that there was no political difference between the generations; the only differences came when dealing with traditions, codes of dress, prayer and so on:

We talked about the same things. But we differed in our way of dressing. It was only Ma Mabude and Mama Mpondo – they wanted us to wear long skirts, and no trousers, strictly no trousers. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

They were traditionalists. Especially if we didn't open with a prayer, we would get a scolding. And if you are over 18, you must have something on your head. Mama Mpondo was a sangoma. Ma Mabude would say 'You are destroying PEWO! Wearing trousers, and you don't even open with a prayer! You are destroying this organisation.' Adelaide Mabude, there is a creche named after her in that area. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

The choice of particular forms of dress seems to have been driven by strategic, rather than feminist, motives. On some occasions, the young women dressed 'respectably' in long skirts and *doeks* (head scarves), to attend political trials; on others, when in hiding in rural towns, they dressed as *makhoti* (young wives) so as not to attract attention. However, there were occasions when they discarded feminine respectability and dressed as men, or at least adopted more practical clothing for militant or underground activities, as illustrated later.

### **Women's role in building civic organisations**

Many of the struggles of the mid-1980s were co-ordinated by what became known as civic organisations or, more simply, 'civics'. The early 1980s saw the building of civic organisations in many of the black townships of the Eastern Cape. PEBCO's revival in Port Elizabeth was paralleled with the formation of similar organisations in Uitenhage, Grahamstown, Port Alfred, Duncan Village, Cradock and elsewhere. Cradock, in particular, was to become the centre point for the expansion of a radical form of residents' organisation, under the leadership of the dynamic and visionary Matthew Goniwe.

Women's role in the civics, and the relationship of women's organisations to the local civic, varied widely. Generally, the leadership of civic organisations – including PEBCO and the Cradock Residents Association (CRADORA) – was almost entirely male. However, the line between the civic and the women's organisation was often blurred, and women played an important organising role in the campaigns that were taken up by the civics. Sometimes the women formed a subcommittee within the civic structure, but more often women just worked within the civic as organisers; sometimes the women's organisation worked in partnership with the civic; sometimes leaders or representatives of various organisations would form a co-ordinating structure or forum to take up a particular campaign. In Port Alfred, for example, there was the notorious 'Central Committee' which consisted of the executives of the civic, women, youth and student organisations; Kholeka Nkwinti, who was organiser of the Port Alfred Women's Organisation, played a key role in this committee.

The nature of civic organisation, focused as it was on the household and the concerns of township residents – housing and living conditions, rent and service charges, electricity and sewerage provision – was inherently of concern to women, especially older women who were responsible for households and bore the burden of poor service provision. Ivy Gcina noted that PEWO's first campaigns were around 'civic

issues': 'Firstly we took the programme of electricity, water, sewerage, we took these things up' (Gcina interview).

A particularly good example of women's involvement in such civic organisation was found in Cradock. In October 1983, CRADORA was launched and took up a successful campaign against the rental scheme in Lingelihle township. It went on to take up other causes that affected older township residents, such as pension payouts, and implemented practical community projects including a crèche, an advice office and an adult literacy scheme. Women were central to all these initiatives, and CRADORA, while not being a women's organisation, relied strongly on the grassroots organisational abilities of middle-aged women. Tetelman notes that, 'CRADORA attracted elders' support because of its adroit use of older women as organizers. While women did not serve on the executive, they played a powerful secondary role' (1997: 181).

As in Port Elizabeth, particular individual women who were veterans of the struggle in the 1950s were to play a key role in this new wave of organisation. Nonyanga Sibanda, known widely in the Eastern Cape as 'The General', became a leading civic organiser, and her 'political acumen, unbending commitment, and physical presence proved invaluable' (Tetelman 1997: 181). As a young woman in the 1950s she had become a leader of the ANC Women's League and had led a boycott of the beerhalls in 1957. She proved inspirational to the new generation of youth who became involved in the 1976–77 uprising, and educated the youth about the history of the Congress movement and the non-racialism of the ANC. By the 1980s she was in her fifties, and Tetelman described her thus: 'Now in her fifties, Sibanda was larger than life. She had brilliant piercing eyes, a quick tongue, an impassioned commitment to justice and equality, and a huge and powerful body.' She had been imprisoned and subsequently banned, and had 'earned fame for once hurling two policemen out of her home' (1997: 139–40).

Women also played an important role in sustaining the organisation through what are more usually considered 'women's roles': catering and fundraising, making and selling goods. One activist remembered that if CRADORA was in financial crisis, 'You find these women go out of their way to find the money...Pudding stands, selling stands in each and every area of the township' (Tetelman 1997: 181).

Women were also able to respond to community needs as they arose, and formed the necessary organisations to deal with specific problems. Hence in Port Alfred, parents and teachers formed the Nomzamo Student Guardian Association, taking up the issue of ill-treatment of students by one of the teachers. When students came out on boycott, Kholeka Nkwinti notes:

So we thought, let's join them in their demands, so we formed this organisation. Women were instrumental there, when children were chased away, we went to that school to get the books of the children...The men were at work, so the women were instrumental, we had to go and fetch the books. (Nkwinti interview)

At another point, she assisted elderly ‘mamas’ to form the Port Alfred Pensioners’ Association, taking up cases where pensioners were cheated or defrauded of their proper pension payments by corrupt officials, ensuring that they knew what money they were supposed to receive, and that they received it. She also formed an Information Centre, which became much more than an advice office. As will be seen, it was perhaps in the Port Alfred township, named Nemato (Nelson Mandela Township) by residents in 1985, that self-government became something of a reality.

From late 1983, when the Eastern Cape region of the UDF was formed, women’s organisations such as PEWO became affiliates and participated in the various local and regional structures of the UDF. Contemporary academics such as Georgina Jaffee noted that the relationship of the ‘women’s question’ to national liberation began to be discussed, as a younger generation of women activists became involved. Within the UDF, discussions began on the lack of women leadership, and how women’s issues could be taken up by affiliates (Jaffee 1987). However, much of the struggle in the mid-1980s was organised on an ad hoc basis, with local organisations responding to conditions and issues in small towns, with little support from elsewhere. Co-ordination of regional and national events was limited, with symbolic days, notably the commemoration of National Women’s Day on 9 August, providing a focal point for communication between different women’s groups. As one PEWO leader explained, ‘Sometimes we will go to the former Border Region to address women’s meetings especially during international and national events, 8th March and 9 August’ (Gcina interview).

By the mid-1980s there were discussions within the UDF and its women’s affiliates around the need for co-ordination of women’s organisations. In April 1987, the UDF Women’s Congress was formed, bringing together eight regional women’s organisations. The ‘core’ women’s organisations of the UDF were FEDDRAW (based in the Transvaal), NOW (based in KwaZulu-Natal), and UWCO (based in the Western Cape). PEWO was also a founding member of the UDF Women’s Congress, which was a ‘concerted attempt to assert women’s leadership, bring women’s issues into the UDF in a more forceful way, and ensure that women’s struggle is an integral part of political struggle’ (Jaffee 1987: 84). Jaffee noted that the UDF Women’s Congress intended working closely with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), which had been formed in 1985, in order to ensure that grassroots organisation was built among working-class women.

Meanwhile, the UDF co-ordinated attempts at building organisation in small towns throughout the region. Matthew Goniwe, the Cradock civic leader, was elected onto the UDF Regional Executive Committee as regional organiser, and engaged in a process of assisting other townships in adopting the street and area committee model of organisation. Tetelman notes that Goniwe ‘often relied on female activists to mobilize residents in other townships. Nomsa Frans and Nonyanga Sibanda traveled with him and spoke frequently’ (1997: 198).

PEWO also began to play the role of an ‘outreach’ organisation, travelling to newly militant rural towns and starting women’s organisations. Ma Mabhala explained that,

'We used to go with Mrs Gcina to organise women in farm areas, in rural townships like Bedford' (Mabhala interview).

Other PEWO members attempted to organise women in the non-African residential areas. One activist remembers going house-to-house in the northern areas (coloured suburbs) of Port Elizabeth, pleading with women to join PEWO:

We also organised coloured women though few were keen to join. I remember we used to take buses and go to the northern areas entering each and every house, begging them to join the organisation. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

PEWO's outreach attempts involved building relations with trade union organisations and church groups. As one PEWO leader explained, 'It organised women from Cosatu to join women's structures especially PEWO because we believe that problems were not on factory floors but also where we stay' (Gcina interview).

However, it is not clear what success PEWO had in this regard, as there is little evidence of women from non-township constituencies being actively involved in the organisation. In relation to churches, PEWO at times prioritised the 'winning over' of the more conservative church-based women's groups: 'We also formed relationships with other women's structures such as the Women's Desk which was supposed to infiltrate women from churches' (Maqungo interview).

PEWO remained, however, a predominantly African, township-based organisation, with a strong identification with the culture of the ANC Women's League and FEDSAW, as evidenced in the green and black uniforms sewn by their sewing project members. Women organisers in Port Elizabeth and elsewhere drew on the history of FEDSAW, and in particular on the women's march against the extension of pass laws in 1956, to make the point that women did have a role in the liberation struggle. This explicitly political history was combined with an appeal to women around their day-to-day oppression, which was integrally linked to living conditions in the townships and the administration of townships by the Black Local Authorities from 1983 onwards. Tetelman thus quotes activist Nomsa Frans who recalls:

We would talk about the house [housing issues like rent and services], involvement in the struggle, why they [women] are supposed to participate, aims of the Women's Federation...Nonyanga would talk about the 1950s, the 1956 Women's March, trying to show women they are powerful. (1997: 198)

These organisational efforts drew both on the history of the liberation struggle, and on the grassroots problems facing ordinary township women – what was sometimes termed by intellectuals as 'struggles around reproduction'. On the ground, this approach ensured that the older generation felt included, rather than imposed on by the militant youth.

Tetelman notes, though, that, 'For all their importance in sustaining the civic, few women had any impact on shaping CRADORA's strategies' (1997: 181). Sibanda was the

only woman to occupy public platforms. Nyameka Goniwe, the wife of Matthew Goniwe, understood that women activists were content to ‘sublimate these (female) issues into broader political issues and organisation’ (1997: 181). Tetelman concludes that, ‘...most civic organizers hesitated to transcend conventional gender boundaries. Older female activists accepted – if sometimes grudgingly – the constraints placed upon them and continued their organizing on behalf of CRADORA’ (1997: 181).

In the Eastern Cape, at least, it can be argued that the organisation of women was, by and large, subordinated to the broader strategy of the national liberation movement. Where women’s organisations were formed as separate structures, their programmes and actions were integrally related to those of the civics and the UDF structures in any particular local area or township. The programmes of PEWO, for example, had no explicitly feminist content, and in many cases were aimed at bringing women into the broader political struggle, in particular under the banner of ‘Congress’, rather than organising them around their own interests as an end in itself. Nevertheless, as will be shown, the participation of women in the township uprising of the mid-1980s was not only extensive, but had interesting consequences: not only did their participation ‘mesh’ particularly well with certain forms of grassroots, ‘low-key’ organisation that became necessary, but they experienced in many cases a significant empowerment at the local level as they gained influence in grassroots organisation.

## **Women’s role in the 1980s’ uprising: mobilisation and campaigns**

One of the most interesting questions in relation to the uprising of 1985–86 is that of the contradictory relationship of women to the politics of confrontation. On the one hand, there was the identification of township women according to traditional gender roles: the older women being ‘mothers of the nation’; the younger women playing ‘support roles’ within male-dominated organisations. It has been argued that the 1980s saw young males taking control of public space, while women were expected to provide shelter and guard their private space. Representations in writing, film and photography of the ‘young lions’ almost always portrays the aggressive and macho young men confronting the state. Mothers of the (male) youth who were caught up in violent conflict were expected to be strong, nurturing, dignified and concerned with protecting their families and seeking ways to outwit the apartheid security forces. Women would cook for the ‘comrades’, provide safe houses for those in hiding, give relief to those fleeing from tear gas, and look after the small children so as to ‘free up’ the youth for more active campaigns. Women were outraged at the often arbitrary violence perpetrated against the youth, and played a critical role in expressing this outrage, organising funerals, running advice offices and crisis centres, raising funds and taking food and clothes to detainees.

On the other hand, the uprising created space for many young women to challenge these gender roles. What is documented below is how young women activists were militant and proactive, seeing themselves as equal to their male comrades. Many women were activists in their own right. Fewer women than men were involved in leadership positions, and fewer women than men participated in overtly militant and quasi-military structures such as the *amabutho*, the informal youth militia who confronted the apartheid security forces, enforced boycotts and dealt with collaborators. Yet there were women in all these positions and structures, and the role of women was by no means confined to involvement in separate women's organisations. Indeed, women often played the critical role at the grassroots level of organisation and mobilisation around particular campaigns and, in addition, played the role of social regulation through grassroots structures such as street committees or anti-crime committees.

Seekings (1991) argues that there were 'shifts' in women's participation, which related to general changes in township politics combined with constraints of patriarchal ideology and divisions of domestic labour. Women mobilised extensively over a range of civic issues, but were largely 'demobilised' as township politics came to revolve around violent confrontation. In addition, he notes that women were rarely prominent in the 'youth' and played a more visible role, though limited, as 'peacemakers'. While Jaffee argued that, 'Women are playing a fundamental role in the reorganisation of communities and in the politics of protest' (1987: 88), she also put forward the idea, similar to Seekings, that repression was making it increasingly difficult for women to organise at grassroots level. However, a different argument is put forward by Beall et al. (1987) in relation to women's organisation in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1980s. In this argument, repression in an ironic sense opens up space for women to play a greater role in organisation:

With the increasingly severe restrictions on mobilisation imposed by the state, the struggle has become locally organized and more community based. Since the home, community and children are effectively managed by women, attacks on these by the SADF [South African Defence Force] and vigilantes precipitated women's greater involvement in politics. This has shifted struggle more firmly onto women's terrain. (1987: 98)

How are we to understand these differing interpretations of the role of women in the 1980s? While it is clear that as levels of violence and repression increased from late 1984 onwards, the ability of all organisations – including women's organisations – to organise publicly was curtailed, it is not immediately clear what impact this had on the role that women, as opposed to men, played in the tumultuous events that followed. Were women 'demobilised' by violence, as argued by Seekings, or did they seize the spaces offered them – not only by the removal of male leadership, but by the formation of new kinds of organisation which were more localised? Through an examination of some of the campaigns and strategies which women engaged in in the Eastern Cape townships in the mid-1980s, an attempt is made to answer this question.

## The UDF Million Signature Campaign

In the first six months of 1984, the UDF campaign against the tricameral Parliament and the Black Local Authorities (BLAs) took the form of a ‘Million Signature Campaign’ (MSC). There was much debate about this campaign, both at the time and in retrospect – about whether it was appropriate to township conditions, why it failed to reach its goal, and the role it played in building non-racialism. Seekings’s account of the campaign emphasises the ‘lack of enthusiasm for the MSC among many African activists’ (2000: 105) and he notes that Stone Sizani, co-ordinator of the MSC for the Eastern Cape, recalled that it was ‘difficult to persuade affiliates in African townships to incorporate the MSC into their own programmes’ (2000: 105). Youth leader Mkhulisi Jack, also from Port Elizabeth, said that activists were divided over the campaign, with some feeling that it had been ‘imposed from above’ (2000: 105).

However, interviews with young women activists in Port Elizabeth reveal a different understanding of the campaign, and an enthusiastic commitment to the grassroots, ‘door-to-door’ method of campaigning in the townships. It seems that women were more committed to this campaign than men. The reason they gave was the timing of the collection of signatures, which took place in the townships on a Sunday morning.

The door-to-door signature campaign against apartheid – we were part of this campaign. This was like going to church – every Sunday morning at 8am we are in the streets of PE, door to door with our leaders, we were saying No to the Koornhof Bills. (Gaveni interview)

These young women activists also went to the ‘northern areas’ (the former coloured group areas) with UDF publicity secretary Stone Sizani to campaign against the tricameral elections. They went house-to-house in Schauderville and Chatty townships, where they found people were going to a meeting of the Labour Party, to be addressed by Alan Hendrickse; there was little support for the UDF.

During the campaign, UDF National Publicity Secretary ‘Terror’ Lekota visited Port Elizabeth:

Comrade Terror Lekota was impressed at some stage when he visited PE. We started at Elalini Ebomvu – that is Red Location – and collected many signatures; he then asked us to move to other areas, you know his visit was a joy to us. (Gaveni interview)

Every Sunday, early in the morning, we were collecting signatures. We would get very hungry and buy a loaf of brown bread, a sweet, and share it with Terror Lekota. (Group discussion)

For women, this explicitly political campaign took the place of Sunday churchgoing, while for men it was a time to recover from excessive drinking on Saturday night:

And the one million signature campaign, the UDF campaign, that was our religion. Every day at 7 o'clock, even Sunday morning, wherever the campaign was, we were there. Mainly female comrades; the male comrades had *babelas* [hangovers] at that time! (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

The campaign was also important in building non-racialism. The co-ordinating committee in Port Elizabeth had a number of women representatives on it from different parts of the city, and activists of all races held a number of 'signature blitzes' in various areas, building co-operation and knowledge of different areas.

### **The campaign against the BLAs**

In the second half of 1984, however, the focus shifted from the public UDF campaign against the tricameral Parliament and the Koornhof Bills, to the situation in the African townships, and the role of the BLAs in particular. As with other townships in the Transvaal, the initial source of conflict was the installation of the BLAs as part of the government's policy of displacing its responsibilities for administering black residential areas onto councils which were meant to be elected by residents. With limited powers and even more limited resources, these BLA councils were considered impotent puppet structures by most residents, and a successful boycott of the elections in 1983 meant that most were appointed and were therefore not considered legitimate.

PEWO activists claimed credit for their leadership of this campaign: 'PEWO and PEYCO were leading this campaign, because women who were campaigning [against] the election of councillors – [using the slogans] "Asinamali" and "Zamukulungisa" – were women' (Gaveni interview).

These women remembered that the campaign against the BLAs was not confined to youth activists: 'And old Mrs Sapeta, she used to go to each election station at the time of the tricameral elections, and educate people not to vote. That was in 1983–84' (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview).

Overt confrontation with the BLAs began in Port Elizabeth in September 1984, with PEBCO challenging the Kayamandi Council Mayor Tamsanqa Linda about his appropriation of Alice Mavela's house. PEBCO called a mass meeting which demanded the return of the house to Mavela, and threatened a boycott of Linda's shop. In the same month, the Kayamandi Council further incensed residents by announcing increases in township service charges, including an increase from R10 to R25 for shack dwellers. PEBCO called another mass meeting in October, calling for a boycott of rent offices, Development Board liquor outlets and Linda's shop. PEWO was one of the mass-based organisations to support these calls.

When one of the councillors was due to speak at the Daku Hall in Kwazakele, the women requested sharing a platform with him to explain why people should not attend the meetings of the BLAs. He did not agree to share the platform with them; as a result, the young women pelted him with rotten tomatoes. These PEWO members described

how they used to go to the rubbish skips at Njoli Square and find rotten tomatoes and other things to use as missiles. Three of the (then) young women discussed their involvement in this particular action:

We wanted to share a platform with him, we wanted him to give us a platform, so he can listen to the people, why they should not attend those meetings. The councillor did not want that. I don't know where the rotten tomatoes came from. But I remember throwing tomatoes, and we disrupted that meeting. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

They came from Njoli. For rotten fruit and vegetables, we used to go to Waste-Tech, to those big skips by Njoli, and pick up all the rotten things there, fill our plastic bag with those rotten fruit and veggies. We used to go inside there, we didn't care about the smell. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

I remember going to Centenary Hall to destabilise their meeting. We threw rotten tomatoes and apples at them. (Gaveni interview)

Other young women were involved in the protests as PEYCO members. A typical example is Thandeka Febana, who joined COSAS in 1981 as 'just an ordinary member of COSAS, I was supporting class boycotts and school boycotts' (Febana interview). While still a teenager, she then joined PEYCO in 1983, under the leadership of the charismatic Mkhuleni Jack, and as a youth activist she says, 'We used to disrupt the Black Local Authority' (Febana interview). By 1986 she was a Chief Marshall, although only 20 years old.

The campaign against the BLAs was hugely successful in the Eastern Cape, from the high level of boycott of the initial poll, to the various campaigns against rent hikes or other specific actions of the BLAs. The campaign gathered momentum as township residents' anger grew in the first months of 1985. BLA councillors were gradually forced to resign and in many cases to leave the townships altogether. The protests against them were not confined to young men. In many townships, groups of youths would gather at the houses of the councillors, chanting and singing, and sometimes throwing stones. When councillors or their guards responded with violence, the protests frequently took an ugly turn, with protestors being shot or councillors or their families being injured or even burned if their houses were set alight.

Such violence was not strategised by the leadership, nor was it uniform across all townships. In Port Alfred, the well-organised community persuaded the council to resign, and effectively took over its functions in the township. Kholeka Nkwinti explained how this happened:

We called the councillors to resign, to move out of that council, because the council was doing nothing for the people. We dig our own pits for toilets, we dig our own pits to burn our rubbish, so why are we paying for this council?

We put so much pressure on the council, we infiltrated the council, we had one man inside there, we influenced that person so that each and every time they took a resolution he could just always...

Q: Vote against them?

Yes. Eventually the mayor was so frustrated, we said the simplest thing is for you to take off the gowns before the meeting, and leave everything. And the whole council did this, they took off their gowns, and that was the collapse of the council.

Q: Was there any physical threat?

No, as you are saying, it's a small community, everyone is related to one another, and people understood why they should leave the council, because its not serving the people, they are there as De Klerk's stooges, its just to rubber stamp, nobody decides what to do. So they realise themselves that this thing is no good.  
(Nkwinti interview)

In the absence of a functioning BLA, the UDF-aligned township organisations effectively took over the running of the township:

After they resigned, I think we took over, literally. There was no [government] structure. We formed an Information Centre where we began to operate the crèche, because there were these young kids, and also helping people with ID documents, and people being chased from the farms who don't have a place to live – we would have to allocate plots for those people.

Q: More than an advice office? Government functions?

Exactly. We were just pushing our own agendas. Even Mr Naude, from the BAAB [Bantu Affairs Administration Board], would say we have given up now to the UDF, they are ruling the township, go the Nkwintis, they will help you. (Nkwinti interview)

Township-based organisations were simultaneously engaged in a number of different forms of protest and campaigns during this period. In addition to the campaign against the BLAs, the schools boycott of 1984 has been mentioned.

Campaigns against high rentals, lack of adequate housing and hikes in bus fares were all taken up by civic organisations. The role of women in such campaigns was not merely a supportive one, but an active one of dissemination of information, persuasion and at times even coercion of those unwilling to participate.

## Stay-aways and boycotts

In the Eastern Cape, consumer boycotts and bus boycotts provide good examples of women's active participation. The notion that these actions were imposed on black communities by male leadership, and enforced on often unwilling older residents by militant young men, is clearly inaccurate in most cases where the strategy was deployed in the Eastern Cape. Consumer boycotts are a particularly interesting form of mobilisation where gender roles are concerned: in poor communities where women are usually the primary consumers, in holding the responsibility for obtaining and preparing food for their families, it could be envisaged that a boycott enforced by young men would be resented if not openly resisted by older women, who in many cases are their mothers. Yet this was clearly not the case: in Port Alfred as well as in Port Elizabeth, the women's organisations worked closely with the civic organisations in implementing the consumer boycotts. PEWO member Fikiswa Gaveni, on the co-ordinating committee of the consumer boycott in Port Elizabeth, played a leadership role in monitoring the observation of the boycott.

In early 1985, for the three days of the 'Black Weekend' of 18–21 March, the first limited consumer boycott was implemented in Port Elizabeth, along with a three-day stay-away. The strategy of boycotting businesses 'in town' – in other words, having a negative impact on 'white-owned' business with the aim of forcing citizens from other sectors of the population to take note of what was happening in the townships – proved enormously successful. In the tightly organised African township of Nemato in Port Alfred, the first sustained consumer boycott of white-owned businesses was launched in May 1985. The strategy was to prove so successful that it spread 'like wildfire' among UDF affiliates in various towns. The Port Elizabeth boycott began in mid-June, and similar consumer boycotts were implemented in Grahamstown and in other small towns.

The bus boycott also served as an example of women's active participation in implementing militant strategies. In one instance, the PEWO leadership sent a delegation to the management of Algoa Bus to threaten a boycott of buses if a planned rise in bus fares went ahead. Although sceptical of their ability to implement a boycott, the manager did not implement the bus fare increase, which the women claimed as a victory. In another instance, when bus fares were increased, PEWO adopted a campaign of boycotting buses and preventing the buses from entering the townships. Young women activists told how they did this:

There was a bus boycott that year – 1987? We were throwing stones, throwing petrol bombs, stopping the buses coming from town, putting big trees on the road, big drums. And we used to hit people who were using buses that time, hit them with sjamboks.

Q: We being who? PEWO?

PEWO and PEYCO, amabutho, everybody...With fires, we set alight the buses.

Sometimes we used to go to the houses of the bus drivers, burning their houses.

(Maqungo interview)

These campaigns illustrate how PEWO campaigned as part of PEBCO around the ‘daily bread’ issues of township life: electricity, water and sewerage, high rentals, the allocation of houses by the BLAs, and the rise in bus fares. For women engaged in these struggles, there was often no clear memory of specific PEWO activities. The way in which campaigns were co-ordinated usually involved the formation of a specific co-ordinating committee, or a ‘broad forum’ of various organisations. Thus Ngoma, deputy chairperson of PEWO, was mandated to serve on a forum of the UDF where rent and consumer boycotts were discussed. While women’s organisations were represented on the structures co-ordinating such campaigns – the Consumer Boycott Committee in Port Elizabeth, for example – these were essentially political strategies devised by the predominantly male leadership of the UDF and civic organisations. There were few occasions when women took up specifically women’s issues and used the tactics of stay-away and boycott to bring home their message.

### **Port Alfred women’s stay-away**

One such instance where women took up specific ‘women’s campaigns’ with remarkable imagination and tenacity was the ‘women’s strike’ in Port Alfred.

The Port Alfred Women’s Organisation (PAWO) had been formed in March 1986, aiming to ‘discipline the youth’ and run community projects. In May of that year, PAWO made one of the most unusual and effective women’s protests of the uprising. The entire female workforce in the township, most of whom were domestic workers, engaged in a totally successful withdrawal of their labour, in protest against the rape of an elderly resident and police lack of action against the rapist.

Kholeka Nkwinti, the PAWO organiser at the time, explained the background to the strike:

Women went on strike because of many things that took place there. Women were not satisfied with how the police looked after certain cases. People would come to us as a women’s organisation and say ‘I’ve been raped’ and the police are just not taking these cases seriously. So this one happened, to this old mama, and we thought no, this is enough. (Nkwinti interview)

The perpetrator was known as a ‘respectable man’ in the township, and women knew that the police ‘will just turn a blind eye’. Sure enough, the elderly rape victim reported the case to the police and laid a charge, but nothing happened. The first action taken by the women was to go to the police and demand the arrest of ‘this gentleman’. When the police still did not act, they decided to protest:

We could see that the police took it lightly; they were not serious about the case. So we met as PAWO, we talked to our membership, and then we took a decision that we must take our toyi-toyi and address this rape. So we went to the police station but the police blocked us on our way. We ended up at the information centre, and took a decision there that there is only one thing we can do, which is to take a drastic stand – all women. So fortunately, it was a Sunday when we took the decision, and Monday we had to go to work – so nobody pitched up. (Nkwinti interview)

Most of the women in Nemato township worked as domestic workers, and the withdrawal of their labour was bound to have an impact on the whole community. While the women on strike spent the week singing and toyi-toying in the township, the white women were forced to realise their dependence on black domestic workers:

The strike lasted for a week. Few white women, about three, came to the information centre, that's where we met, and they asked us why, because it was frustrating for them – they couldn't go to work without the nannies, their easy life was now difficult, their husbands' shirts are not being washed, and so it was a real struggle for them. So we said to them we want women on that side to know exactly how we feel this side. So if you know the pain of having no one to look after your child, prepare your food, for us it's even worse – this mama has been raped, and your husbands have done nothing about it, have not arrested this man. They promised they would go back and talk, tell them the reality. (Nkwinti interview)

The police claimed to have arrested the rapist, but he was released again. In the small, highly organised township, residents quickly knew that he was at large. When the police remained ineffective in taking action against the rapist, the women took matters into their own hands.

They would pretend that they have arrested this man, and then release him again. We would have these streets committees, and they would report that they have seen him, he is around, he is not arrested. Eventually we could see that this case is going nowhere, so we made life difficult for that person. We said if you can rape a person who is equal to your mother, then you don't deserve to live here, because we are all your victims. So you must just get out. So because of pressure, he could feel he was not safe, and so he left. (Nkwinti interview)

While it is not clear what the ultimate fate of the rapist was, the stay-away had two immediate results: firstly, the rapist was banished from the township; secondly, PAWO had 'opened up communication' between black domestic workers and their white employers (Jaffee 1987: 88). When asked why women in Port Alfred engaged in such a singular form of protest, Nkwinti's response was that the nature of the community was such that women were heading the households; with many adult men away at work, women took the leadership role in dealing with community problems of this nature.

## Women and violence: offensive and defensive roles

From the end of 1984, the situation in the black townships of Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage, Cradock and elsewhere became increasingly violent. There is an extensive literature on the violence of the mid-1980s in the Eastern Cape and elsewhere. Yet, as with the analysis of the civic and youth movements, there is hardly any analysis of the role of women in, and response of women to, this violent conflict. In much of the literature there are unstated assumptions made concerning gender identity and the ‘correct’ or traditional role of women. In general, women are presented as conforming to two broad roles: the passive or innocent victims of male violence, or the defenders of home and children. The reality of women’s experience was more complex and varied than this, however. While it can be argued that the response of the older township women to the escalating violence was primarily defensive (although there were exceptions to this, as will be seen), young women were in certain situations able to play the roles normally assigned only to men – of aggressors or combatants. In addition, there were strategies adopted which blurred the line between offensive and defensive action, and introduced women to leadership roles as the conflict escalated.

Beall et al. argue that the identity of women as mothers is not inherently conservative. Their research in Durban townships showed that women acting in ‘essentially traditional roles’ in the defence of their families ‘can be seen as radical and perhaps revolutionary’ (1987: 99). They argue further that the UDF defined the role of women in such a way that it ‘contains the potential (sometimes realized) to empower women and transcend traditional roles’ (1987: 100). Their interviews with women showed that women were supportive of the militant actions of their children, and that ‘this support resulted in the mothers’ politicisation’ (1987: 100). They quote one of the mothers as saying, ‘If people talk about a gap between mothers and sons, this may be in the long term, but if there is a crisis the first people to get there are the women and they help their sons’ (1987: 99). Examples are given of mothers organising all-night vigils to protect their children from vigilante or security force attack. They emphasise that township women did not see this role of protector of children as confined to their own biological children, as ‘[w]omen feel a social obligation as mothers to all children in the neighbourhood’ and that ‘[t]his sense of communal responsibility provided an imperative for women’s active involvement’ (1987: 100). This view is borne out in the case of Port Alfred, where there was a particularly close relationship between the youth and older women:

There was a good relationship, very good; even during the arrests, some of the youth were arrested and the parents, PAWO would organise everything for the students – lawyers, visits, food. Special mamas would cook for them. We were organising if they need something, we would do it; collect money among ourselves to get bail money.

The youth knew these are their mothers; that respect was still there. We tried to keep that respect between mother and child. So that we don't find ourselves not being able to control them at home. They were at the forefront: the mothers and their children; the fathers were not there. We would try not to break that relationship. (Nkwinti interview)

As vigilante violence and security force repression spread through the townships of South Africa in the mid-1980s, Beall et al. argue that:

the site of struggle shifted to the home and community, into a sphere in which women have a particular responsibility and which they feel particularly obliged to defend. Clearly these perceptions are socially constructed: the home is traditionally regarded as the women's domain, and the care of children is 'women's work'. (1987: 100)

There were particular forms that this active involvement took, such as women marching in the front of protests as it was felt less likely that security forces would shoot women.

Such tactics forced women to take positions in the front line of the battle and allowed them to assume leadership roles, laying the basis for a transformation of women's role and position in society. This points to a classic contradiction in the role of women in struggle: they are drawn in to defend their terrain but in so doing are forced to move beyond narrowly conceived notions of their roles. (Beall et al. 1987: 100)

Women's support for their children in situations of violent confrontation took various forms: from providing hiding places, food or health care, to 'carrying stones in their pinafores to give to the youth' (1987: 101), to even participating in physical fighting themselves.

In addition to the role of women in defending their children, they were also drawn into peacemaking or mediating activities. Examples in Durban townships were given of women reducing the potential violence of 'people's courts', intervening to prevent 'comrades' from taking violent action against girls accused of sleeping with soldiers, or mediating between children and SADF troops on school grounds (Beall et al. 1987).

On the other hand, Beall et al. argue that young women or girls were not able to play the same role as older women. Among the youth, boys were able to dominate because girls had greater responsibilities in the home and were also not given as much social space to go out at night, attend meetings with boys and so on. 'While mothers are creating space for themselves, they may be limiting it for their daughters' (1987: 102). Through exploring the various roles played by women in the violent uprisings of the mid-1980s in Eastern Cape townships, it is possible to test some of these ideas about gender roles.

## Defensive actions against state repression and violence

In Port Elizabeth, by the mid-1980s, women leaders in the townships had established their voice against repression. Together with the Black Sash, a white women's human rights organisation which played a range of roles in this regard, they were to play the role of 'defenders of the children' and supporters of those who were detained, shot or went missing. In many small towns, the Black Sash assisted local women in establishing advice offices to play this role.

Women had already campaigned in the early 1980s, during the school boycotts, against the random shooting of schoolchildren by certain security policemen in the townships. In the mid-1980s the PEWO leadership again assumed the role of 'defenders of the children', sending delegations to the police complaining of random security force action. Ivy Gcina describes how she led one such delegation to the police:

But we always petitioned about that one. One day I remember we went and we took the petition in to the police station next to Labour; I was among the people who were mandated to go there, to ask Why? (Gcina interview)

PEWO also arranged visits to prisoners:

There were comrades in prison, and we were involved in going to visit them – Edgar Ngoyi, Ernest Malgas, Mkhuleni Jack and others. Sometimes we would take other women to go and visit them. (Maqungo interview)

PEWO organised a march demanding the release of political prisoners:

Immediately after the release of the State of Emergency detainees, PEWO organised a march to the New Law Courts demanding the release of all political prisoners and detainees. That was a very big march indeed. After that we had a rally at the back of the New Law Courts. We did ask for permission. (Gaveni interview)

This anti-repression work involved building alliances with various groups: churches, traditional healers, even prison warders:

We also wanted to form an alliance with the women of the South African Council of Churches. We worked together with those people. We also organised marches, when there was something burning in this region. [When] we organised marches, we called all those people like *izangoma* [traditional healers] to come with us, people from the church, the prison warders were also coming to join us. [*Izangoma*], they were wearing their [traditional] attire. And sometimes they would also put on their *imphepho* [traditional medicine to chase away the devil, for protection] – if someone was going to be shot, like in Limba's march, there were people who were shot there; it was a very big march, on a Sunday. So they were putting on their *imphepho*, for protection. (Maqungo interview)

As violence increased, PEWO played a prominent role in appealing for restraint from the police, petitioning for funerals not to be disrupted, and calling for women to unite across the racial divide. PEWO leadership explicitly mobilised around their identity as mothers, defenders of their families and protectors of their children. The PEWO leadership played a significant role in organising funerals, politicising the funerals of those who became victims of police violence, and providing support to parents of these victims. As the death toll rose, from late 1984 onwards, and the ‘cycle of funerals’ began, PEWO was driven to respond, as PEWO president Ivy Gcina explains:

Then, the shootings – you remember the graveyard in Zwarte, it is just full of the graves of children shot by policemen who were going up and down shooting them. The police said it was the children who were stoning the police vehicles. But the police are supposed to arrest them, you know. It’s because they were shooting. If there’s a funeral of maybe fifteen cases, when we come back it’s going to be more than that fifteen when we come from the cemetery. Then we took the decision, nominated the people who were going there, and I was among them, asking what’s going on, why do they kill our kids so much? Out of the graveyard, they were shooting everybody, the elderly, the young. (Gcina interview)

### The Women’s March

One of the most memorable protests of the mid-1980s in Port Elizabeth was the Women’s March of 20 April 1986. In this instance, PEWO leaders enlisted the support of many of the churches in the townships, arguing that ‘enough is enough’ and that the cycle of ‘unrest victim’ funerals ending in violence and leading to more funerals had to be broken.

We said it’s enough, what are we going to do now? We are the women, we are going to take over the funeral; there will be no more children [dying]. (Gcina interview)

They argued that women could end this cycle by taking control over one of the funerals, gaining the support of the majority of churchgoing women, as well as of sympathetic white women’s groups such as the Black Sash. One of the demands was for the removal of the SADF from the townships.

We mobilised all the church women, all, all the churches of Port Elizabeth, then we had a meeting with the executives of the churches. There was going to be a funeral service in Avenue A, at the Bantu Church of Christ. You remember it – the Black Sash was on the front line! And the tear gas...and, then, my dear, that day, the women come from all angles, black and white. That day, I was so proud of the women in Port Elizabeth, that day. Then, Virginia Ngalo started to sing. Yo! The army shot us with tear gas. (Gcina interview)

The march was extremely well organised, with thousands of church members participating, and a group of white Black Sash leaders joining the township leadership at the front of the march. The march was dispersed by the security forces with excessive shooting of tear-gas canisters and the use of a sneeze machine; women of all races and ages were caught in the clouds of gas, trampling each other as they attempted to run for cover. Women were taken into the houses of residents who assisted them in obtaining relief from the effects of the tear gas.

One PEWO activist recalled that she was holding the PEWO banner:

I was holding that big flag, then – it said ‘PEWO – South African Women on the March’...We were scattered by police, tear gas was everywhere. I don’t even know where that flag is: I had to throw it away, because we were running, running, so I lost the flag... (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

The women then assembled at the Church of Christ in Avenue A, New Brighton. Virginia Ngalo, another PEWO executive member, addressed the funeral. She stated that, ‘Women were playing a leading role because they were tired of collecting the bodies of their children from the mortuaries.’ Women had ‘taken the unusual step of organizing and conducting a funeral because they wanted to prove the truth about who provoked incidents in the townships between the “so-called stone-throwers” and the police...When our sons are killed, it is always said that they have been throwing stones and petrol-bombs at the armed police’. She asserted that the women aimed to show that the killing of their young people was ‘no longer tolerable’ and that they were ‘now prepared to die where their sons were killed’ (*Evening Post* 21.04.1986). Ngalo thanked the white women who were present ‘because they have shown us that they are feeling the same pain that we are feeling about our children, as they would for their own’ (*Evening Post* 21.04.1986). A woman leader of the End Conscription Campaign spoke in solidarity with the black women.

The packed church was again tear-gassed, suffocating those inside and causing them to douse themselves with water from the baptismal font.

The funeral continued and thousands made their way to the graveside for the burial of the four unrest victims. The police seemed determined to disrupt the funeral – they fired shots and used the sneeze machine to disperse mourners.

There was tear gas inside the church – but we managed to speak there, I was a speaker there. When we arrived in the graveyard, the police were there, the tear gas was like smoke, we couldn’t see each other, we couldn’t see but we managed to come home, no one knows how, because they were shooting now, straightaway shooting. (Gcina interview)

Church ministers intervened to avert a confrontation between mourners and police. Some mourners were injured by birdshot, two cars were damaged by birdshot and, tragically, one mourner died when he fell from the back of a bakkie and suffered head

injuries. And yet, it was remarkable that despite the extreme provocation, only one person died. Thus, although women failed to prevent the cycle of violence from continuing, the funeral did represent a victory of a kind, for it served to prove the women correct in their assessment of the provocative actions of the security forces.

### The building of street and area committees

Some analysts of the 1980s' uprising have posited that the extreme state repression from 1985 onwards 'continually disrupted popular organisation and worked against the growth of grassroots organisation necessary to advance the specific interests of working class women' (Jaffee 1987: 76). Yet, the experience of women in forming grassroots structures which were in many cases a response to repression, offers an alternative understanding: that women were, in fact, empowered by the contradictory 'space' which was opened up by organising in this way.

One of the often-noted developments in the 'township uprising' of the Eastern Cape was the formation of grassroots structures of street and area committees. In some cases, the structures were formed specifically as a response to repressive conditions, where mass public meetings were no longer possible. In such cases, the structures were formed with the ANC's 'M-Plan' strategy (named for Mandela) of the late 1950s in mind, as a means of communication between leadership and members of civic organisations, in order to ensure the successful implementation of strategies such as consumer boycotts. As resistance developed, the structures adopted a range of functions, and in some cases became an alternative form of government. They became dispute resolution mechanisms, crime control committees, forums for political debate, and decentralised decision-making bodies. Some townships were particularly successful in employing this organisational strategy: Lingelihle in Cradock, Kwazakele in Port Elizabeth, KwaLanga in Uitenhage and Nemato in Port Alfred were particularly good examples.

Kholeka Nkwinti describes the process in the Port Alfred township of Nemato:

So that was the beginning, NOSGA [Nomzamo Student Guardian Association], and then a civic was formed, a women's organisation was formed, a youth organisation, and so forth. So all organisations formed and all those organisations had to meet, in the Central Committee. So we take decisions there and then we go and implement. All the executives would meet in the Central Committee. It was well organised, the whole township was organised from the beginning to the end, the whole community, they couldn't break it, because each and every street, even the closest and furthest, was so organised, you know exactly what was happening. Even the leadership of the street and area committees would organise their own meetings, and take the whole township. Each street would have a committee, then they would form an area committee where they would meet and take decisions. You could divide that township into four areas, which would meet.  
(Nkwinti interview)

While these structures were widespread in the townships of the Eastern Cape and elsewhere from 1985 onwards, they varied in the strength of their organisation and in the functions they served (Adler & Steinberg 2000). What is of concern here, however, is the role of women in such structures. It is tentatively argued that because of the localised and home-based nature of these organisations – streets, yards and neighbourhoods – they were able to include ‘ordinary women’ and extend the roles that such women had played in more overtly political and public organisations.

In Cradock, it is noted by Tetelman that the structures were implemented in late 1984 as a means by which civic leaders were able to ‘restore their authority over younger activists and at the same time incorporate disaffected elders’ (1997: 196). He notes that many older women joined these structures, in particular the street committees, and that there was agreement that the committees were effective in dealing with domestic disputes, domestic violence and petty crime. His findings correlate closely with a study of the street and area committee structures in KwaZakhele, Port Elizabeth. Here, most residents agreed that the structures, when functioning at their peak, provided a genuine experience of community control and empowerment. Women in particular were able to participate in an unprecedented way in decision-making and conflict resolution at this very local level. The control asserted by the *amabutho* together with the civic structures resulted in a decrease in crime (although not, of course, a decrease in political violence). This combination of structures (the street and area committees and the *amabutho*) – with organisational campaigns such as the ‘shebeen picket’ – resulted in the successful control of ‘anti-social behaviour’. These forms of behaviour were often the source of women’s grievances against men: rape, robbery, excessive drinking, spending the household money in the shebeens, and so on:

There was peace, really, at that time. There was no robbing at that time. Even the shebeens, we were monitoring the shebeens. The shebeens were closing at 9 o’clock strictly. (Gaveni interview)

When asked some years later about their perceptions of these structures, some women looked with nostalgia to a period where they felt safer to walk in the streets: after 1990, the rise in violent crimes against women went hand in hand with the collapse of these structures. As one woman in KwaZakhele remembers:

The street committees functioned to implement decisions taken; to maintain law and order, to prevent theft, break-ins, rape. Women would move freely in the townships at night. There was no time for gangsters. People want to go back to that time... (Cherry 2000: 121)

This view is reiterated by Kholeka Nkwinti from Port Alfred:

So at least now I would say violence in the township was something you didn’t hear of. [Women were] very safe. You know, this is what the women would say, we feel now that we are in control, we can walk freely at night, our children look

after us. We could go to our night meetings, you know nobody is going to harm you; you can leave your washing on the line, nobody will take it. You know, at that time, we could feel that it was nice. Now, this is what is worrying is [high levels of rape and abuse of women] – there are times when you would think that that time should come back; we knew exactly how to do these things, how to manage our townships. (Nkwinti interview)

As older residents, including many women, were members of the street and area committee structures, they took responsibility for what happened in their immediate neighbourhood. In the almost complete absence of administration or policing from the state, they felt considerable pride in their self-governance of the townships.

### The *amabutho* and women's involvement in violence

Seekings's account of youth politics in the 1980s sees 'youth' as an undifferentiated category of militant young people, predominantly males – although some examples are given of young women who participate looking for camaraderie (Seekings 1993). Straker, in Seekings, gives descriptions of male youth who tried to 'play the romantic role of a warrior-hero, blurring macho fantasies and reality' (1993: 65). Seekings, drawing on these profiles, concludes that participation in political struggle gave (male) youth 'an opportunity to harness their machismo and aggression for a reputable cause, and earn respect from others, both as fighters, and as heroes' (1993: 66). His conclusion is that as the conflict became more violent, women were 'sidelined' as their direct participation in such violence was, if not actively discouraged, then at least not welcomed. Swilling's (1994) descriptions of the Uitenhage youth also fail to give us any understanding of the gender roles and gender dynamics within youth organisations in this period.

When the existing documentation on violence in the 1980s is examined – for example, the UDF/ANC conflict with the *amaAfrika* (older men) in Uitenhage was documented by the Human Rights Trust and later by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – there is hardly any evidence of the active participation of young women or girls. Most of the conflicts were between *amaAfrika* and younger men (UDF and then ANC). Consistent with TRC statistics for the whole period, and for the whole country, the majority of victims of the 'township uprising' of the mid-1980s were young men – indicating that they were in the front line of action against apartheid security forces, as well as in the front line of action in political feuds against other organisations. Without exploring in depth here these patterns of violent conflict – the role of vigilantes, of gangs, of older men with particular interests through positions of traditional leadership – it should be noted that it is possible to see the active forces aligned to the UDF and the ANC as consisting primarily of young men. Young men were more likely to become both perpetrators of violence and victims of police shootings or of attacks by vigilante forces, *kitskonstabels* ('instant constables' – black police auxiliaries

hastily trained by the apartheid regime), *amaAfrika* or other groupings of older men. Beall et al. thus noted that violence was ‘generalised among men and exceptional among women’ (1987: 102).

Many of the accounts of the township violence in the 1980s depict women simply as victims: either direct victims of physical violence and the destruction of their homes, or as female relatives of men or boys who were killed or injured in the violence. And yet, women were involved in various ways in the violence. As noted by Beall et al., in the case of the KwaZulu-Natal violence, women on both sides of the conflict were involved in ‘supporting, directing and organizing violence of various kinds’ (1987: 102).

The informal structures most involved in perpetrating violence in this period in the Eastern Cape townships became known as the *amabutho*. While the term is used differently in KwaZulu-Natal, where it refers to traditional Zulu military formations, in the Eastern Cape it became a generic term for the informal ‘cohorts’ of young men of the same peer group, who organised around ‘street actions’ and played the role both of confronting security forces and coercing residents in support of campaigns. They also on occasion took brutal action against those deemed to be spies or collaborators.

In some respects, Seekings’s analysis of the ‘macho’ culture of the *amabutho* is correct. The young women in PEWO acknowledged that there were few women in the *amabutho* structures:

The men were not trusting us, though we were willing to take part. We wanted to. They thought we were weak; but we were strong, we were fighting with our hands. They were not saying directly [that we should not fight]; the main thing is that action was never discussed with women. You can discuss other strategies. Action – we need to fight – was a male thing; you will only know that there is this action to be taken, but you won’t be actively involved.

We wanted to be there with the *amabutho* but they don’t ask us; they say ‘go back to Khusta, go to PEYCO. Go and discuss politics; you are not fit for action, you are fit for support’. And we used to support them, giving them money, some few bucks. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

What is interesting is that those few who did participate, adopted the male identity of young warriors. They were teenage girls, often high school students and COSAS members, and they had not yet begun to identify themselves as ‘mothers’ or in a nurturing or supportive role. Instead, they saw themselves as combatants, and were willing to adopt masculine identities and images in order to play an active role in the unfolding struggle. One such young woman was the late Comrade Pamela:

Pamela, she would dress like a boy; she can identify with the boys. If you looked at her face, she was very beautiful, you would know this is a girl, but she would dress like a boy, wearing a cap, that old jacket of hers, and she would walk like a boy. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

In Port Alfred, similarly, the young women would dress in coats and go on ‘missions’ at night:

Girls in Port Alfred were so militant. They were just like men. They would even come to me at night, and disguise themselves, you wouldn’t think they were girls, they were wearing coats; they would call and you would realise it’s so-and-so, they are in a mission, they will go and do it. Even if you won’t say who did something, you would know, it wasn’t the men. And they wouldn’t put up with anything from the male comrades, they were just equal. We were all equal, nobody would succumb to their husband. (Nkwinti interview)

While those who adopted a masculine identity were the exception rather than the rule, the majority of young women saw no conflict between their feminine identity and their active and at times militant role in the struggle. The young women of PEWO/PEYCO did not shy away from the idea of armed struggle, or of participating in the uprising:

We were not afraid. We wanted guns but we didn’t know where to get them. We were angry, we were frustrated. We were fighting with stones, with available things... (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

When asked if she was afraid during these violent times, one PEWO activist responded:

No! No! No! [we laugh]. I was furious, I wished I was trained militarily at that time, we fought back. (Gaveni interview)

Not being included in the armed units of MK (there were few of these operating in the Eastern Cape townships in this period), nor in the informal ‘military’ structures of the *amabutho*, these women were prepared to go beyond peaceful picketing, even attacking councillors with rotten tomatoes, as described earlier. Where necessary, they were prepared to engage in physical battle. While the *amabutho* manufactured their home-made firearms and petrol bombs, and engaged the security forces where possible, most women were not involved in such quasi-military actions. However, there were circumstances in which women were involved in physical fighting – not with security forces, but in localised ‘feuding’ of the kind that occurred between UDF and Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO) supporters.

In the Port Elizabeth townships, violent conflict between UDF supporters and supporters of an AZAPO grouping aligned to the Reverend Maqina, dominated township politics from April 1985 until the end of that year. Similar conflicts were to occur in the townships of Uitenhage, Cookhouse, Somerset East and elsewhere, where particular families, businessmen or political activists from organisations not aligned to the ANC were supported covertly by the apartheid state in a concerted campaign to undermine the liberation movement by creating divisions. Such violence merged with the provocative actions of security forces in disrupting public meetings, marches and funerals, and the ‘cycle of violence’ became focused on a succession of weekly funerals.

While it is probably true that women's involvement in such violence was exceptional, it would be equally wrong to portray women as passive victims of such violence. In some situations, women were prepared to engage in physical fighting:

And that day of the funeral, when those AZAPO guys attacked Mpumi Veto, we came out to defend him. And it was physical fighting then. There...there was stone throwing and fist fighting. It was a toe-to-toe fight. We lifted up our skirts. We were fighting AZAPO with our fists. As young women, we were fighting with the men. Not a cat fight – a toe-to-toe fight! We were very angry, very frustrated. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

In this conflict, the participation of women was not limited to the youth:

Mama Noyo – an older PEWO member – she was at the front line of the fight, throwing stones. Now talking about her age, she was supposed to be saying 'No – don't do this!' but she was at the forefront – she was our age [now] at that time, she was like a mother to us, but she was leading the fight. She carried a big sword. Serious. A sword, like a panga, used for cutting grass. (Lutywantsi, Madlala and Ngwane interview)

There were also instances where young women were involved in actions such as the burning of buildings:

The first group that was arrested in Port Alfred were young girls, 16 or so. They were arrested for burning down the house of a teacher, for public violence. Only one young man out of eight or nine...during that time of the uprising, it's like a wave – you can't really say why it was a certain group; everybody was militant, everyone was moving forward. So those women were just active; not supportive, but the leaders of themselves. The leader of the youth was a woman. Waya Mabona – now working as a teacher for the disabled in PE. Young women were included on equal terms, they could play the same role as young men, they were very militant. They could see that we were militant, as women, it was women in Port Alfred who were in the forefront. (Nkwinti interview)

At the same time, ordinary township women were critical of the *amabutho* when their violence got 'out of hand' – the necklacing or burning of homes of women suspected of being informers or of collaborating, and the persecution of young women accused of 'sleeping with the enemy'.

I must not forget to mention that some of the *amabutho* had no political direction at all because they did not want to listen to the leadership.

[There was] corruption amongst youth who were burning people's houses with no valid reason. (Cherry 2000: 123)

The relationship of the street and area committees to such acts was ambivalent. On the one hand, they relied on the *amabutho* to enforce decisions at local level:

All those who defied the organisation's calls were physically manhandled or their properties destroyed. Civil servants, especially the police and headmen, had to leave the township. It was not a person's democratic right to engage or not in the people's call. To the *amabutho* it was a betrayal not to heed the call. And it was difficult for the leadership to deal with these activities as the *amabutho* were accountable to no structure. (Cherry 2000: 122)

On the other hand, they tried to assert control over the *amabutho*, sometimes unsuccessfully:

One lady was burnt, because she had an affair with a *kitskonstabel*. She was burnt in the yard of the Kwazakele high school. The area committee distanced themselves, and instructed the street committees not to get involved. Many condoned it in private but never publicly. But we would not condemn it or try to discipline those responsible. The *amabutho*...had their own structures of discipline. (Cherry 2000: 122)

In general, the street and area committee structures acted to modify the behaviour of the *amabutho*, although there were limits to their abilities to control these youth.

## Conclusion

This chapter does not claim to be a comprehensive history of the role of women in the Eastern Cape; still less does it try to generalise about the role of women in all regions of South Africa during the 1980s. Instead, it draws on a limited number of oral sources and other documents to illustrate and analyse some of the key issues around gender identity and women's organisation.

From the above accounts we can begin to understand the varied and gender-specific roles played by women during this time of upheaval: from Chief Marshall to 'COSAS cooker'; from providing refuge to young men, to fist-fighting in the streets; from being tortured in police cells to providing food and clothing for those in prison – women were both aggressors and defenders, activists and protectors, combatants and nurturers.

Hassim has argued that women's organisations 'opened new political spaces for women alongside the mainstream of male-dominated union or civic organisation' and that they 'linked women's "private" household struggles to larger questions of economic marginality' (2003: 68). Although the limits of women's role in the leadership of organisations during the 1980s is stressed by Hassim, and is borne out by the research on the Eastern Cape, and despite Seekings's assertion of the limits to participation of young

women in organisation and in the politics of confrontation, this chapter has illustrated some of the varied ways in which women did participate: as leaders, as organisers, as activists, as aggressors and as defenders.

Is it possible to understand these roles as in any way indicative of a feminist consciousness? While the nature of women's organisation in the Eastern Cape cannot really be understood as feminist, given that these organisations were to a large extent 'subsumed' under the national liberation struggle and in very few cases articulated a feminist agenda, there is a different conclusion that can be drawn from these women's experiences. The tentative conclusion posited here is that the nature of grassroots organisation, whatever its flaws and limitations, was such that it enabled ordinary women to be genuinely empowered – albeit briefly.

Kholeka Nkwinti expresses this sense of empowerment eloquently:

I would say it helped me, in a way, and also the Port Alfred women would say, because we all grew together in that struggle. I would say, myself and them, it brought us up together, and made us one big family, knowing that we can stand up for our rights and not give in, not be scared. It made us strong. We don't succumb to anything. Even now, if you see those women today, you will see that they are empowered. I was empowered. I am a strong woman. I am fearless.  
(Nkwinti interview)

As an experiment with participatory democracy in the context of extremes of repression and intolerance, it allowed women – of all ages – to play an active role, as Hassim (2003) has argued, in linking their own gendered roles as mothers, homekeepers and neighbours, to the broader political imperatives of national liberation. Women thus provided the critical link between the realities of township life and the national democratic imperative. They played this role in various and sometimes contradictory ways: in some cases not constrained by traditional gender roles, in other cases using their identity as mothers to mobilise or defend their communities. And there can be no doubt that there were some circumstances in which women were significantly empowered to take control not only of their own personal lives, but of their community as a whole.

Twenty years on, many of these women activists from the 1980s are now in their forties; many are still struggling to survive. When asked how she would describe herself, one of the activists said: 'I am unemployed, a single mother, a fighter' – reflecting both the pride and the bitterness of those young women who gained little from the militancy and bravery of their youth. Asked if she is a feminist, she replied, 'Yes, but other women have benefited from the rights I fought for' (Maqungo interview).

## NOTE

- 1 For the historical account of this period of struggle in the Eastern Cape, I draw on my own experience as a (then young) woman activist in various organisations including the ANC, the United Democratic Front, the End Conscription Campaign and the Black Sash. In addition, I draw on my research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as research on the histories of struggle in Kwazakele (one of the townships of Port Elizabeth) and in KwaNobuhle and KwaLanga (the townships of Uitenhage). In addition to my previous research in Kwazakele, which involved a number of surveys of residents of Kwazakele, I have conducted interviews with a number of women activists from the townships of Port Elizabeth. One of the challenging and painful parts of conducting such research is meeting again with 'old comrades', activists who are part of my peer group, and assessing how far we have come. While all of the women who spoke to me were proud of the role that they played in the struggle, they are almost all struggling in the new democracy. For many middle-aged residents of the Eastern Cape townships, there is a profound sense of disappointment: while appreciative of their hard-won democratic rights, they have in most cases not benefited from the new economy. In fact, with unemployment at over 50 per cent of the adult population, most feel excluded from the formal economy, and unable to contribute productively to our new society.

I am particularly grateful to Nobahle Ngwane, who organised her women comrades from the 1980s to participate in this research project. For Nobahle and her comrades, it was a bittersweet victory; many women look back on the days of struggle with nostalgia, despite the hardships they went through. Some of these issues are explored in this chapter. I am also grateful to my friend Mike Tetelman, who spent some time with me while he researched his thesis on intergenerational relations in the struggle in Cradock.

## REFERENCES

- Adler G & Steinberg J (Eds) (2000) *From comrades to citizens: The South African civics movement and the transition to democracy*. London/New York: Macmillan.
- Beall J, Friedman M, Hassim S, Posel R, Stiebel L & Todes A (1987) African women in the Durban struggle, 1985–1986: Towards a transformation of roles? In G Moss & I Obery (Eds) *South African Review 4*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Cherry J (2000) Kwazakele: The politics of transition in South Africa, an Eastern Cape case study. PhD thesis, Rhodes University.
- Cherry J (2003) To work hard and walk fearless: The specificity of women's resistance in South African history. Paper presented at Human Sciences Research Council Women's Day seminar, 8 August.
- Hassim S (2003) The limits of popular democracy: Women's organisations, feminism and the UDF. *Transformation*, 51: 48–73.
- Jaffee G (1987) Women in trade unions and the community. In G Moss & I Obery (Eds) *South African Review 4*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Seekings J (1991) Gender ideology and township politics in the 1980s. *Agenda*, 10: 77–87.
- Seekings J (1993) *Heroes or villains? Youth politics in the 1980s*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Seekings J (2000) *The UDF: A history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983–1991*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Swilling M (1994) Urban control and changing forms of political conflict in Uitenhage, 1977–1986. PhD thesis, University of Warwick.
- Tetelman M (1997) We can: Black politics in Cradock, South Africa, 1948–1985. PhD thesis, Northwestern University.

## INTERVIEWS

- Febana Thandeka, New Brighton, 17 March 2005. Interviewed by Nobahle Ngwane.
- Gaveni Fikiswa, Kwazakele, 5 March 2005. Interviewed by Nobahle Ngwane.
- Gcina Ivy, ANC MP and former president of Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation. Port Elizabeth, 29 September 2004. Interviewed by Janet Cherry.
- Mabhala Nontuthuzela (Ntutu), New Brighton, 16 March 2005. Interviewed by Janet Cherry and Nobahle Ngwane.
- Maqungo 'Smally', New Brighton, 11 March 2005. Interviewed by Janet Cherry and Nobahle Ngwane.
- Ngoma Nolutando, Kwazakele, 15 March 2005. Interviewed by Nobahle Ngwane.
- Nkwinti Kholeka, Kenton on Sea, 11 August 2005. Interviewed by Janet Cherry.
- GROUP INTERVIEW: Ngwane Nobahle, 46, of Zwide, Madlala Nontobeko, 44, of Zwide, Lutywantsi Nompumelelo, 45, of Kwazakele, Port Elizabeth, 30 November 2004. Interviewed by Janet Cherry.
- GROUP DISCUSSION: Hlazo Buyiswa, Lawu Stunkie, Matthews Mphumla, Msizi Nomvuyo Mtikrakra, Ngwane Nobahle, Nkayi Pinki, Tofile 'Norooi' Ntombizanele. Port Elizabeth, Women's Day, 9 August 2005. Recorded by Janet Cherry.

## ARCHIVAL SOURCE

- Eastern Province Herald archives: Files on women, Ivy Gcina, 1980s unrest.

# Women, labour and resistance: Case studies from the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area, 1972–94

PAT GIBBS

This chapter deals with the role of black and coloured women in the trade union movement in the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area. As the leadership of most of the unions was, and still is, dominated by men, two issues will be evaluated. Firstly, the role of women trade unionists in the push towards liberation will be considered. As the position of any disadvantaged group is a telling measure of the state of a democracy (Jackson 2005), gender reveals specific aspects of justice through its intersections with race and class, with work and home, and with the public and the private domain. Thus the struggles of black, female workers, who were always at the bottom of the labour market, indicate the devastating effect apartheid had in South Africa on ordinary lives and the types of changes that were therefore needed. Their demands for democracy focused not only on political change, pay and factory conditions but also on living conditions, children's needs, acceptable health standards and even rights within families. Secondly, the impact women unionists had on gender struggles in South Africa – their fight against the constraints and discrimination under which they laboured at work, in the unions, in the family and in society in general – will also be evaluated. In an attempt to be as comprehensive as possible in the confines of a slice of local history, I have assembled a variety of life stories from different unions in what was a coloured labour preference area. Thus, the following analysis will mainly include the experiences of a few coloured female factory workers in four different unions and a black female administrator at the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). Their memories will all be woven in and around the story of Eugene Johnson, a National Automobile and Allied Workers' Union (NAAWU) shop steward and national executive member from 1983–84 to 1992. As the predominantly male auto industry was a pivotal factor in Eastern Cape labour turbulence, the story of Eugene Johnson, working in the closely related, female dominated, auto component industry at Autoplastics in Port Elizabeth (PE), provides a revealing account of the intersection of

political struggle, union activism and gender. It is also contextualised by the union activity of the women in her family. Thus, although the main focus will fall on the late 1970s to the early 1990s, one of the working lives extends as far back as the 1950s.

## Brief note on methodology

As much has been written about mainly male labour struggles in the Eastern Cape of the 1980s, and little information is documented on the experiences of women, I have attempted to draw women into the central focus of this chapter by using oral interviews, which adds another dimension to the existing histories. In fact, I have gone further than that and have tried to assemble a collage of voices, allowing the raw, untailored memories to actively structure the text. Sometimes the voices refer fleetingly to ‘key events’ – for example, the negotiations leading to the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) – but emphasise, often at length, such issues as women’s forums, demeaning personal experiences such as discrimination by both employers and the unions, and intensely emotive topics like the physical attack of Albertina Matiwane as a result of racial divisions within NAAWU. For this reason, I have tried to keep well-known background information to a minimum and supply narrative and contextual data only where necessary.

## Three generations of women trade unionists (1948–82)

### Eugene Johnson’s unionisation

Eugene began work at the age of 17 in 1981 at Autoplastics in Holland Park. This is a sub-economic area situated near the North End of PE and comprises both houses and factories. Eugene now lives across the narrow road from the factory which, in a way, symbolises how tightly wound up in the union her life has been. As Autoplastics is allied to the auto industry, the approximately 300 mainly female workers belong to NUMSA. Women were not predominant in the auto industry in South Africa as it was seen as being physically demanding and too dangerous. They were generally employed in the auto component industry in the Eastern Cape because of their perceived ‘dexterity’ and cheapness.

Eugene joined NAAWU in 1982 at a highly significant time in union struggles. It was the year after the government had, for the first time, recognised black unions based on the Wiehahn Commission’s recommendations of 1979. It was also a year which saw the rise of union militancy. During the preceding two decades, trade unions and the South African Council of Trade Unions had experienced severe governmental suppression. The new recognition legislation was in exchange for registration and some control by

industrial councils, which roughly divided unions into pro-registration unions (Federation of South African Trade Unions [FOSATU]) which believed unions should focus on worker issues before attempting to address political goals, and anti-registration, more militant, populist (including community) unions which focused primarily on political change. Union membership and trade union activity rose dramatically. A wave of strikes between 1981 and 1982 broke out across the country, with work stoppages particularly high between 1982 and 1984 (Stats SA 1986: 7.3). ‘The Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage region,’ according to the National Manpower Commission, had ‘long had a reputation for being strike prone. For five of the nine years between 1980 and 1988, the area’s strike incidence relative to its worker numbers, was the highest in the country’ (Anstey et al. 1994: 10.5) and in 1988 and 1989 local research indicated that the strike propensity of Uitenhage’s black and coloured workers was among the highest in the world ‘because of the dominance in that area of the motor industry with its large plants’ (Anstey et al. 1994: 10.5). A number of new community unions, such as the Motor Assembly and Component Workers’ Union (MACWUSA), emerged from the early strikes and in this ferment, political resistance, community boycotts and stay-aways were to escalate too. Mass community organisations were established in PE, such as the PE Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO), the PE Women’s Organisation (PEWO) and the PE Youth Congress (PEYCO) which, despite differences in the first half of the 1980s, were to later support and be supported by the unions (LACOM nd). The 1980s, therefore, is when trade unions were able to start mobilising and consolidating their strength to the degree that, driven by the movement in exile, they became a primary vehicle inside the country that carried the liberation struggle forward to resolution.

In 1982, oppressive working conditions led Eugene to become one of four female shop stewards in NAAWU, which was affiliated to FOSATU. At this time, Autoplastics controlled its workers through a policy of divide and rule, where women were pitted against each other by being given inadequate facilities or by favours being allocated to a select few. Eugene recalls:

It was so frustrating because women could not go to the toilet without getting a disc...When you get to the toilet you have then a time – you have a minute. We were chasing each other because there were so many women who wanted to go to the toilet...Another thing was there was so much favouritism. Those years if you did not have an affair with the supervisor, or weren’t dressing nicely, or had



Eugene Johnson at a COSATU rally in 1986.

nice hair, you were not favoured. Really very bad. If you were fair in complexion or had long hair you were favoured. There were no women supervisors. There were nice jobs for example sewing and bad jobs for example spraying, stapling. Only the ‘models’ had the nice jobs with the nice soft hands...They divided the women. Those women were very reluctant as they could sit but we had to stand. Even the supervisors would employ women they thought were nice and affairs with supervisors were rife at that time. There were women workers who were fighting against each other as you had a supervisor who had an affair with two women in one department. (Johnson interview)

Tyrannical control by employers of the workers was widespread. Tina Abrahams of Cadbury Fry recalls:

The management were very ‘verkramp’ that time [1975–80]. We had to fight to get what we wanted. We started 7am to 5.15pm...we had white supervisors and they treat us so bad. That lady would say to me, ‘your tea time is 12 minutes – ten minutes for your tea and two minutes to pee! And you see that you back here!’ and she would stand and wait like an army. And we had families to see to and then we had these frustrations to come to and then we started night shift also. (Abrahams, Potgieter and Mbanga interview)

A living wage and health issues, such as birth control, pregnancy, maternity leave, childcare and even pap smears, were also important goals for women. But, Albertina Matiwane, a NAAWU administrator, highlights the double burden of both production (work responsibilities) and reproduction (domestic responsibilities) borne by women and the need for job parity. This double burden kept them crowded into the lower grades, often a cost-saving strategy by employers or an attempt to break worker control, as they did not easily get the chance to study courses to improve their work grade even though they might have had the skills. Thus, unlike men, women were tied to a low income and reduced bargaining power. Women’s wages were only enough for transport and a little surplus, a situation made worse if a woman had no man. Albertina indicates how this was linked to the social impact of women’s health issues:

...if you take six months’ maternity leave, then it takes a long time to get money, then you go back to work early and get sick, or get abortions and...[there’s] dying, children thrown in gutters, toilets... (Matiwane interview)

Eugene became more active in the union after seeing the performance of people like Gloria Barry, who was at that time a NUMSA official and who later became the first regional secretary for NUMSA and a Member of Parliament in 1994. Les Kettledas, who was then the recruitment person for NAAWU and FOSATU regional secretary, also actively encouraged her to become a shop steward, but the catalyst that finally drew Eugene into the union was the women themselves, who were angry at Autoplastics’ divisive tactics:

We all started talking about how this was not fair. One woman, May, now a supervisor, talked a lot about speaking up but she was afraid to talk. She said Eugene must do it because she was not scared to talk. It was bad those times – they used to fire you...those years. Just to get recognition was difficult. Despite the Wiehahn Commission they used to fire you. (Johnson interview)

Emerging from this mood of defiance was a sense of feminist identity at Autoplastics among the women regarding the ineffectiveness of the male workers and a rapidly growing awareness of their own ability to mobilise. At first, men such as Adolphis Zuma and John Kramer had been fighting for recognition of the union, but then they started pushing Eugene to join and to speak up:

But then we found out that these guys were afraid! And they recruited us into the union but did not become NAAWU members because they did not want management to find out in case of victimisation. So we found it out as women, no these guys are messing us up. So we went into this thing ourselves. (Johnson interview)

Despite this feminist pride it has to be said that there were also divisions among women. Many were reluctant to join the union and most were still scared to act. Such fears were realised when Eugene was fired in 1982, three months after she joined the union. Les Kettledas took up the case and before they went to court the company reinstated her. NAAWU was finally recognised at Autoplastics in about 1983–84.

Did Eugene's activism emanate from her family history of social consciousness, or from the changing political context? Her parents, Elizabeth Ann and David Johnson, as well as her maternal grandmother, Ramona Kiviets, had all worked in PE factories and had all been members of unions. But if Gloria Barry was to model worker activism for Eugene, neither her parents nor her grandmother seems to have had the same direct impact on her. Yet, they provide something of an integrated picture, a type of genealogical context of the changes surrounding women in the Eastern Cape trade unions. Eugene reflected, 'You will enjoy the stories. This is also now becoming very interesting the more I think of it' (Johnson interview).

### **Elizabeth's story**

Eugene's mother, Elizabeth, had been a member of the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) when she worked at Union Spinning Mills with her own mother, Ramona. She left in the early 1970s because she was working shifts and her five children were still small. She got a job at Checkers but had a heart attack in about 1987 before the union achieved recognition. Thus, while attempting to get medically boarded, she was dismissed. Thereafter, her health further deteriorated and she eventually died in 1992.

Elizabeth had been a conservative, gentle person who attended a Roman Catholic school. She did not like the way Eugene's union activities caused her to return home late after meetings, or sleep out. 'She could not take it. I sometimes wonder whether that was a cause of her heart problems which she died of' (Johnson interview). Similarly, Eugene's father, David Johnson, who worked at Ford and was a member of NAAWU from the 1960s to 1986, was also fearful of state reaction when his daughter became a shop steward. 'Both my parents were scared' (Johnson interview). Yet, Elizabeth's intense belief in Christianity and her mission to minister to the poor was her own form of social activism and may have been a philanthropic influence on Eugene:

My mother was more like a social type of person – a Christian type of person – who'd pick up people in the street – people that used to drink spirits. You know, she'd bring them to our house...and look after them, take care of them, wash their sores for them...then after that, when he is now right, and he is now baptised, and he's now saved, then she'll fetch another one... (Johnson interview)

Paradoxically, however, Eugene's involvement in the unions seems to have influenced her mother:

My brother was dismissed for alleged fraud from the Post Office [in the late 1990s] and my mother took them to court! So I think afterwards she realised what I was doing was right. They won the case. My brother is still there! He's a shop steward there now. (Johnson interview)

### Ramona's story

Ramona<sup>1</sup> Kiviets, Eugene's grandmother, was, by contrast, much more active in the unions than Elizabeth had been, but Eugene had not been influenced by her because there had been animosity between her father's family and her grandmother and, as a result, she never knew Ramona until her parents got divorced.

In 1948, at the age of 26, Ramona left her home in the farming hinterland of PE and started working 'on the belt' with fruit, pineapples, and baked beans in a city canning factory. In the inter-war years, the pact government's 'whites-first' policy had been upheld, particularly in the manufacturing sector of the Eastern Cape. However, as white women ascended into office jobs and domesticity, and as whites in industry declined during World War Two, a coloured labour preference followed. Ramona was to become a member of the prominent Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU), a branch along with seven other local branches that Max Gordon – a Trotskyist and committed organiser of African trade unions of the time – had established early in 1942, under the auspices of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (Adler 1994: 205). As the employment of whites dropped, it had become impractical for the FCWU to organise along racial lines and it was thus a non-racial trade union which organised all workers together.

Unlike in Eugene's case, motivation to join, worker participation and interest in the union seem to have been mainly managed from outside. Ramona had been recruited into the union by Mohammed Desai, secretary of the local branch and co-ordinator of the new unions but, as management did not recognise unions, meetings had to be held on vacant land outside the factory. Worker issues were about wages and the erratic length of shifts – they would either work short hours or from 8am to 10pm when the fruit came in to prevent it rotting. However, workers such as Ramona were relatively unaware of union aims at that stage and avoided meetings, indicating the gulf between them and their shop steward, Lily Diedrichs, an unusually politicised, coloured trade unionist, Communist Party member and later one of four women at the head of the Women's March on the Union buildings in 1956. Adler explains the situation, saying that although the FCWU 'developed factory level committees to represent workers, [it did not] develop an effective system of shop stewards', while gains were achieved 'through Wage Boards and other such centralized forums' (Adler 1994: 206–7). Progress was also often very dependent on local officials, which emerged as a great problem for the FCWU when Desai turned out to be corrupt. At that stage, the presence of the Security Branch was an added disincentive to participate in union activity – 'The men were there,' says Ramona (Kiviets interview).

Ramona left the canning factory two years later and joined the coloured female workforce at Union Spinning Mills, remaining there for 35 years until the age of 73. This factory was one of the many textile plants that opened in the 1940s as a result of the Industrial Development Corporation's initiatives to stimulate import substitution (Adler 1994). Again, Ramona and her co-workers were encouraged to join the NUTW through the outside agency of organisers from Cape Town. Work concerns then were mainly about cramped conditions and finding ways to articulate their complaints, although a pension fund was started early in the 1950s to which they had to contribute half and which she is still receiving.

Ramona gradually became more involved in trade union issues and was finally elected a shop steward. After two years she became the local chairperson of the shop steward committee of all the associated factories such as Veldspun, Cotton Mills and Boersaam-werk, a merger to strengthen the union's fight for seasonal re-employment. However, these were liaison committees set up by management to co-opt workers and were disparagingly referred to by activists as 'puppet committees' in 'sweetheart unions'. Ramona was to remain on the shop stewards' committee for 18 years until it was democratised in 1982 under FOSATU, which restricted its focus to mainly worker conditions and unfair dismissals, especially of pregnant workers. Her comments reflect an apolitical, symbiotic relationship with management: 'It was easy, because we had meetings with the bosses every month with whom we worked well together,' and, in regard to a fellow worker, 'I told him that he could not work with the machines in that state. He knew that he should not smoke dagga, let alone come to work in that state and still want to operate the machines. At such a time I cannot defend you!' (Kiviets interview).

Yet, Ramona's own brand of defiance grew over time so that, during the second state of emergency in 1987, she was able to confront the Security Branch at a union meeting:

The Special Branch came to our meetings...and once they wanted me to leave...and then there was another lady working in the offices in Durban – a white woman that the Special Branch was after. They wanted this friend, Nellie, to give information of this white lady. They wanted to put me out [of the meeting] and I refused because I said that I had a responsibility to report back to head office...Then I said to her I have done nothing to you and if you go to jail it's your business and you're going alone. But people became scared because of the Special Branch. When we had meetings they were all around. (Kiviets interview)

At the formation of Cosatu, Ramona's union, then a National Council of Trade Unions affiliate, went over to Cosatu. After a series of mergers with other clothing and textile unions, it became the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU). However, Ramona (and fellow workers) were averse to Cosatu's heated meetings and regular strike activity, so she soon retired.

Even though there was not a strong connection regarding trade union work amongst the three women in the Kiviets' family, there may have at least been a degree of social awareness that linked their thinking and that, paradoxically, also allowed Eugene to have an impact on her mother. However, Eugene herself seems to have been more affected by her present – factory conditions, contemporary role models, inspiring NAAWU organisers and an escalating political urgency in the 1980s.

By the mid-80s, women in Eugene's union, NAAWU, had become militant and by 1987, when NAAWU had become part of NUMSA, were aligned to the aims of the Congress Alliance. At that stage, Eugene states that she and her comrades were prepared to die for the cause (Johnson interview). What were the changing factors that led to this militance?

## Women's militance in the Eastern Cape (1973–88)

### Women in manufacturing

During the three decades that Ramona had been working in factories, there had been a tremendous growth in the female workforce in South Africa. Between 1960 and 1991, there had been a 70 per cent increase with Indians increasing fivefold, African and white women almost doubling and coloured women increasing by half. In 1951, there were 73 360 women in manufacturing. This had grown by almost 500 per cent to 359 685 in 1980, so that women formed 24.6 per cent of the total manufacturing workforce. Whereas in the inter-war years white women had been predominant in this sector, by 1970 coloured women had replaced them at 31 per cent. Although in PE a coloured

labour policy was to continue, by 1980 black women dominated the South African female workforce, indicating their growing importance in the economy and in manufacturing in particular (SAIRR 1992: 7; SAIRR 1994: 3).

Back in 1960 when the racial composition of women in industry was changing from white to coloured, Merle Potgieter remembers the racial tensions at Cadbury Fry:

But the time I started here it was white ladies, with the coloured ladies coming in. Most of them stayed in Holland Park. The day we came in it was all white ladies sitting here, but the moment we came in they grabbed the chairs and stuck them away and said ‘...[inaudible]...kaffirmeid sit!’ When the machine had a break, they would give us buckets and a scrub brush and said, ‘There are windows. Wash all those windows and scrub the walls.’ They used to sit at the tables with the chairs and we had to stand. And they used to sit and laugh at us washing. They were also machine workers. There was one white lady at work – she couldn’t speak English and she’d always tell me to stand nearer so I could translate for her. That was the type of white ladies that were here – so called whites...That was the thing that turned us against them the way they treated us. Little by little you see less whites and more coloured women coming in...There were even whites that looked like coloureds and one day I asked one, ‘When did you start?’ Not knowing that it was a white lady. She just gave me one dirty look! (Abrahams, Potgieter and Mbanga interview)

The changing racial demographics were also accompanied by transformation in the gender profile of the workforce. Female workers at this time were particularly predominant in the FCWU; the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers’ Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA); SACTWU; the Chemical Workers’ Industrial Union; and the National, Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union (NEHAWU). These unions were located in PE companies such as Industex (Union Spinning Mills), Lennons (a pharmaceutical company) and Cadbury’s. But women were also predominant in the auto component industries of Autoplastics, Armstrong Hydraulics, Feltex, Wolro (harnesses), Eveready and Hella (lamps) in Uitenhage, and more so when the Labour Relations Act removed male job reservation and more women entered jobs in, for example, companies such as VW, General Tyre and Firestone.

### **Women’s strikes (1973–82)**

To what extent and how did women in the region participate in economic and political protest? South African labour unrest in the 1970s had interestingly always been pre-empted by female strike activity which had peaked in 1973, with 7 500 women strikers, again in 1975 with 2 200 women, and also in 1980, with 8 800 women striking (Shane 1983: 27–8). Already in 1978, strikers at Eveready in PE had combined with community members in a vast community boycott. In 1981 there was a particularly aggressive

FCWU strike at Cadbury Fry, where women allowed hot chocolate on a conveyor belt to pile up in a molten heap on the factory floor. This was in reaction to the dismissal of eight women unionists including the chairperson, Margaret Mollies. Tina Abrahams recalls the women's shrewd handling of the company:

...at that time I had to stand in for the chairlady. So we arranged this strike. I had to go and talk to management and to the workers to tell them what we want. The strike was fruitful, they lost millions and then we wanted to strike again to get their attention. So we started at 6am. Before 8[am], I sent a message not to strike because we heard that someone already went to management and told them I said they must strike. I sent a letter round telling them that management might come and take me from the floor. So at 8, I said they must continue working. Management came and took me into a small room and questioned me...some of management were with the Security Police...so we knew we had to be careful what we say. They asked me if I told the people to strike. I said, 'No, I didn't. As a committee we decided to go and see them at 8.' But I knew it wasn't that. We had said we will strike...They called in some of the other committee members to hear from them as well, but they already received my message and then they let us go. We didn't strike that day, but the strike of the previous day was effective that's why they called the eight back a week after the strike. (Abrahams, Potgieter and Mbanga interview)

1982 saw 'the most sustained and widespread outburst of protest' (Lambert & Lambert 1983: 249) since 1979. The number of strikes and striking workers increased dramatically, with 189 022 participating – virtually double the number that participated in the historical year of 1973 (Lambert & Lambert 1983: 249). During this period, worker confrontation with bosses was 'localised', lacking the backing of industrial unions. Eugene recalls:

There were many strikes for many things: recognition agreements, favouritism, maternity leave, creches, wages and toilet facilities...wild strikes where we all walked out of the factory disrupting office workers, chasing the manager out, shouting at him. Once the women organised a disco in the company, dancing and marching and the company videoed them to frighten them. But the women didn't mind. But we were never locked out. Because we had good organisers at that time like Les Kettledas. Hella women were locked out, but not us. In fact, the conditions in Autoplastics was better than other companies in the same industry. That is why we had – not now anymore – 'factory negotiations' not at bargaining council level. We could talk to the management here...But wasn't like now where you can come to a company and negotiate and then there's agreement. Those years you had to fight and plan to strike, threaten them with court action to move the employers along. (Johnson interview)

Autoplastics typically maintained the old tactic of divide and rule to deflect strikes:

As soon as they heard we were going to strike they would call you in and do some favours for some of you...and then they break the strike or break the spirit or threaten some of you. For example, if we decide we are going to sit for two hours, they would then come to us and say those of you who are not going to sit we are going to give you money. So some would comply. Sometimes it was only the shop stewards taking action because everyone was afraid. So those were the problems. They had to divide us because in our section where the conditions were the worst, we were the most militant. It was so bad to be a shop steward as the company said unionism was communism...warnings all the time for nothing, the supervisor was against you because he was victimised by his mentor. For example, someone would watch me. The manager would say where is that one going to, what is she doing... (Johnson interview)

Nevertheless, after 1981 the unions had consolidated and were able then to respond to employer pressures. Although factory-floor issues did not spill over into a general challenge to apartheid at this stage, there was a real working-class challenge to racial capitalism and the government's 'reform strategy', the Wiehahn Commission and the subsequent Labour Relations Act of 1981. Rob and Lynn Lambert point out that 'it is at this level that the strikes of 1982 led to the intellectual and cultural growth of the proletariat' (Lambert & Lambert 1983: 249).

## **Alignment and conflict: the road to Cosatu (1981–85)**

Escalating state repression intensified the need for both industrial unity and unity between unions and community organisations. Talks about forming one monolithic trade union congress took place between 1981 and 1985, ultimately leading to the formation of Cosatu. The National Executive Committee of the Sweet and Food Workers' Union issued a paper calling for organised workers to start leading youth in the townships, emphasising the convergence of worker and community interests and the need for a convergence of tactics (Lambert & Lambert 1983). Stay-aways, already presaged by the Ford strike in 1979, were an increasing manifestation of this solidarity, particularly in the PE/Uitenhage area (Levy et al. 1986). In 1984, a stay-away was organised by community organisations of women.

But in March 1985, divisions opened up between community organisations and certain unions. PEBCO and PEWO jointly called a consumer boycott in PE from 16 to 18 March and a stay-away on the 18 March in response to massive retrenchments, a hike in the price of petrol and paraffin, and an increase in the General Sales Tax. It was supported by the United Democratic Front (UDF) and community-affiliated organisations. However, such threats to the economy, as well as a claimed lack of consultation,

alienated the workers of FOSATU (and thus NAAWU), the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), the Garment Workers' Union (GWU), as well as the women's unions of the FCWU, CCAWUSA and the Domestic Workers' Union. The Africanist Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) and the Azanian Students' Movement also opposed the UDF alliance. Thus, during the week leading up to the stay-away, tensions reached breaking point with violence erupting between youth groups and workers, and even within youth groups (Pillay 1985).

Although alignment issues were to be largely resolved after the formation of Cosatu in 1985, lasting anger sometimes translated into racial divisions on the ground and, in Albertina Matiwane's case, was to later have a devastating impact on her.

### **Co-ordinated conflict: political theory and caspirs**

Cosatu consisted of 33 founding affiliates, including 'women's unions' such as CCAWUSA (second largest with over 50 000 members), the FCWU (fourth largest with over 26 000 members) and the NUTW (sixth largest with over 23 000 members). Eugene's union, NAAWU, though essentially male, was the eighth largest with over 20 000 members (Cosatu 1995).

Industrial mergers brought more women together: in 1986 Eugene's union joined with the Metal and Allied Workers' Union, the Motor Industries Combined Workers' Union and the National Union of Motor and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA), to form NUMSA; the Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union, the Retail and Allied Workers' Union and the FCWU formed the Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU); in 1987, the General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU-SA) was founded, as well as NEHAWU, by an amalgamation of the Education, Health, Government and Social Welfare unions. In 1989 SACTWU was formed from a merger between the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union of South Africa (ACTWUSA) and GAWU.

Union training after 1985 now became more intensively politicised with people such as Gavin Hartford who was employed by NAAWU and NUMSA from 1986 to 1996: 'We always trained workers on the links between factory and community struggles' (Hartford interview). Eugene concurs:

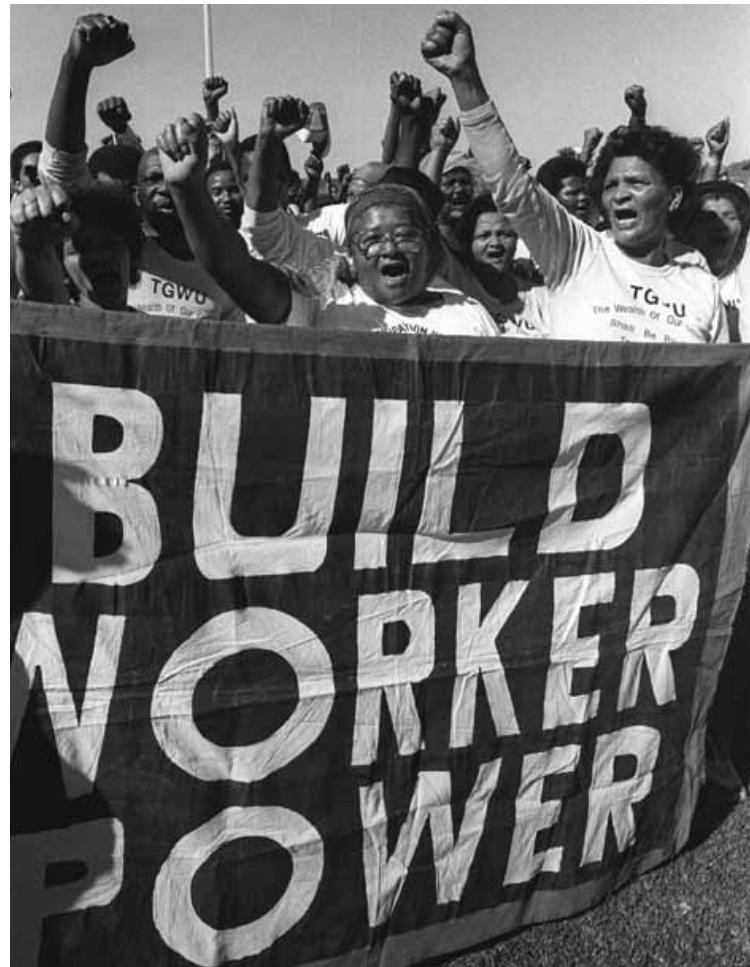
The Eastern Cape was much stronger than other areas because of the training we got as shop stewards, and the calibre of individuals we had in NAAWU. We had Gavin Hartford and Alec Irwin on political education, Irna Senekal who was extremely good on training everybody on co-operatives – Les Kettledas on grievance handling and discipline procedures. It was extensive – seminars and workshops every week. Immense education for shop stewards...we were stronger here because of the particular people in NAAWU and the size of NAAWU, whose headquarters were here because of the motor industry. (Johnson interview)

The intellectual rigour demanded of the women during those years provided good training in itself, as the bosses would attempt to counter the political theory and motivation of NAAWU organisers:

Alec Irwin gave us workshops on political economy. We didn't understand what he was talking about. He told us the ANC was going to govern and we never believed him because the company also gave workshops against what he was saying. Alec would talk about the power of the masses in the community and the workers, that the power is in the workers' hands, and what we can achieve. When we tell this to the company they would say, no the government has the power and the police will get the caspits and the trucks and ride over you when you are protesting outside. Now you don't know who to believe. You want to convince these [union] members what you learn but it was difficult as your own beliefs wavered. Alec was once annoyed with me as he was thinking I'm too controversial. But he was not aware we were getting brainstormed by the company to respect what they say, and on the other hand we are learning things that we never knew. (Johnson interview)

## **Strikes, stay-aways and spies (1988–90)**

Such political mobilisation by Cosatu, an economic recession and the declining fortunes of the auto industry in the Eastern Cape, where 10 000 jobs were lost between 1984 and 1985, fomented union and community unrest. A state of emergency was implemented by the state in 1986–87, including repression of strikes, detentions without trial and the murder of activists. State repression led to another escalation of strikes from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Workers, for example women at Autoplastics, began to strike for the release of employees who had been detained. The nature of the strikes had changed since 1982, now challenging not only companies but the state as well. This occurred against a national context where, 'In the period between 1985 and 1990, more mandays were lost in South Africa than in the preceding 75 years' (Finnemore & van der Merwe 1996: 36). NUMSA led strike activity in the region from 1988 to 1989, but was closely followed by the 'female' unions of the South African Textiles and Allied Workers' Union, the GWU, the Garment and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (GAWUSA), FAWU and CCAWUSA (Parfitt 1992). In 1988, 150 CCAWUSA workers at three PE hotels belonging to the Lombard family were dismissed after a work stoppage. Calling for a joint negotiation agreement for wages and working conditions at all three hotels, workers refused to leave the premises until the police were called (*Eastern Province Herald* 08.03.1988). Vandalism and sabotage occurred elsewhere when food workers rendered their product unmarketable (Parfitt 1992). The



same year, GAWUSA, representing 2 500 workers in PE, and ACTWUSA threatened strike action (*Eastern Province Herald* 15.04.1988).

Collaboration between the unions and community organisations continued to manifest in stay-aways and consumer boycotts:

We had to organise stay-aways...when communities had a problem they would approach us, when they wanted consumer boycotts they'd come to us. We used to go to the bosses and say there's going to be a consumer boycott and we want to support it...We were also tasked then to work closer with the community organisations...We had to mobilise workers to stay away. Employers would say 'those staying away are going to be reprimanded and those coming to work will get a special bonus. A warning first, then final warning, then dismissal'. I remember one time when only 12 women out of the whole factory stayed away because they were scared ...there was a time when I was the only shop steward on the floor because all other stewards had resigned...because they were scared. (Johnson interview)

In the heightened chaos, conflict and suspicion, Johann Groenewald, the human resources manager at Autoplastics in the late 1980s, admits that management spied on unionists:

When I arrived, the union representatives were the only ones allowed to take or make calls and it had to be in the MD's office from the union. There was one simple reason for it: underneath the phone there was a hole in the desk and underneath the hole there was a voice activated tape recorder. So once the worker had left the office he [the MD] could sit back and listen to everything that was said. The excuse given to the workers was one office is being used to stop you running around...Wage negotiation was but a pleasure because at that time a certain branch of the police force had an informer working in the office of Gloria Barry who was the senior organiser for NUMSA and then you knew whatever they talked about and you were kept informed by anonymous phone calls about what was going to happen in the wage negotiations, whether the union was prepared to hang on or not. (Groenewald interview)

Eugene indicates how this too supplemented the divide-and-rule policy:

Meanwhile the workers were thinking that there were informers leaking information to management! Fights used to start amongst ourselves. If one of the workers would just smile at the manager we would say that's the informer. If a person not in the union was sitting in the tea room when the union wanted a meeting there then they'd be chucked out. They perceived them as leaks. Meantime it was the shop stewards themselves. We isolated those people every day. They would resign because they were so miserable. (Johnson interview)

## The struggle within: race, gender and family

### Racial divisions in the unions

Yet, during this turbulence, the unions also laboured under internal racial, gender and family constraints. Workers in PE and Uitenhage had differing experiences of racial division. Uitenhage had a substantial degree of racial solidarity between coloured and black groups as application of the Group Areas Act had only begun there in the mid-70s and because the Uitenhage workforce was mainly black until the mid-80s (Adler 1994; Parfitt 1989). In PE, however, racial cleavages existed between coloureds and blacks for a variety of reasons. The Group Areas Act had already been implemented by the 1950s, leading to more well-entrenched social division; there was a coloured labour preference operating in the automobile sector; and the coloured community had not experienced the politicisation of the black community, as Eugene admits:

...working-class alliance before '85 was just a discussion. Because in the early 80s the challenges in the workplace were that many that you could not focus on the political issues that much because it took us years to learn grievance handling, disciplinary procedures...So when Cosatu was formed...we, from the

NAAWU unions ask what this is all about? Who were the detainees? Who was President Mandela? Because we were not alive at that time...like for example I was reluctant to join the ANC in the 80s, even in 1994, because we did not understand...it's not that we did not want...and NAAWU at that time had to take it step by step...Because if they would have trained us about politics at that time we would have become scared and not joined at all because we were so brainwashed in our houses with our parents because I told you about my father...they were scared. (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

Blacks also led the most politicised community groups such as PEYCO, PEBCO and the Congress of South African Students, as well as unions such as MACWUSA and the General Workers' Union of South Africa. There was thus a strong political division along racial lines in PE between these organisations and the mainly coloured unionists in NAAWU.

As a black activist in NAAWU, Albertina dismisses early, coloured attitudes:

Coloureds used to scab a lot, Armstrong, Autoplastics, Feltex, and...they'd be beaten when they are outside, whether women or men...These companies were first dominated by coloureds who couldn't care what they were getting paid...they didn't have the responsibilities like we had. There was racial discrimination. We fought the companies to get more employment of black women. (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

Amazingly, such racial cleavages were intensified by memories of political divisions from as far back as the 1940s. Eugene reports that 'people were saying, "Eugene was with guys with the Unity movement". Those guys were saying that the Unity movement wasn't supportive of the UDF and all that. But even up until today I don't know what the Unity movement was all about...' (Johnson and Matiwane interview). The labelling of Eugene as a Unity member in the 1980s had reactionary connotations in comparison to the progressive, contemporary movements of the UDF, AZAPO, the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress, since it had consisted of essentially Western Cape, moderate, coloured intellectuals, and had struggled to expand past areas of the Cape. By the 1960s it was practically defunct (Hirson nd; Simons & Simons nd).

Racial bias persisted against coloureds even within NAAWU between the 'black' branches in Gauteng and the more 'coloured' Eastern Cape region. The following conversation between Eugene and Albertina highlights this:

EUGENE: ...those women from Gauteng...when I spoke for example they were not accepting what we were proposing...

ALBERTINA: ...and you found out in other regions it was blacks and they pushed the politics in our forum. Then Eugene stepped up for women's rights...meanwhile in other regions they come with petty things.

EUGENE: For example, when they elected the president of the women's forum in NUMSA there was a big fight about people wanting me as the president...and Dorothy Mokgalo. But because she...

ALBERTINA: ...was black!...because our union NAAWU basically had many coloured members and all the resolutions that were taken in Cosatu and in NAAWU mostly came from the Eastern Cape and we were the ones who had to push that the resolutions were being passed in congress...Also blacks here in the Eastern Cape were asleep.

EUGENE: No they were!

ALBERTINA: ...those factories like Malaphi Carpets and Hella, etc. they were dominated by coloureds and when we launched our structures we had to target all those companies which consist of women. So in national meetings mostly they see coloureds and they were so developed...very, very militant those women.

EUGENE: See...what the apartheid system...they did not employ black women in PE as operators for example table hands, etc. the African women were only there for cleaning.

ALBERTINA: It's not that African women were not militant – they were not there! (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

The alignment differences of 1985 were also still fresh in the memories of the rank and file and, where racially identifiable, seem to have percolated down to union members as racial differences. Albertina, ironically unaware she was later to pay for these differences, highlights the tension:

We used to say coloureds were sell-outs, so MACWUSA used to point at that union and say they were coloureds...And she [Eugene] was not at all afraid at that time, because you know we used to harass coloureds but she was not afraid. Other people used to think she was an African. She was playing both roles – coloured and African – because most of the time she was with us....we Africans went to join them [NAAWU] in order to be registered. And then when we joined, the executive was coloured and they [Africans] expected things to change immediately. (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

Thus for Albertina, a black woman, to remain with NAAWU was unacceptable to elements among black Congress Alliance groups. In 1986, she was so badly beaten up by men with knives and chains that she had to undergo plastic surgery:

EUGENE: Did you tell Pat [the author] you were almost killed...the scars on her face...it was because of her involvement in this union. She almost died...it's not they did not like Albertina. It's because of her involvement in the union.

Albertina was unidentifiable. Her children did not want to look at her. Why did you not tell Pat about these things?...Look at all this! [points to scars on Albertina's face]

ALBERTINA: Because they used to hate our union. Like being in the coloured unions, so they were taking us blacks as sell-outs. And the other woman Gloria Bhala is one who crossed over to MACWUSA so I stayed behind [in NAAWU] and I created more enemies in the community. They didn't want me, so it was difficult to live in my area because of the union...Coloureds were like whites to us...blacks – they said I think I'm white. So they made lot of campaigns against me...[After the attack] I wanted to kill myself but I was encouraged by Freddie [Freddie Sauls, secretary of NAAWU] to be strong and also helped me to get the doctor and get plastic surgery. Freddie has done a lot for me. I am who I am because of him. I could have been dead if Freddie wasn't there. I couldn't stand in front of people. That is what I used to do – I used to participate in all the meetings but later I wasn't strong to face the people...that time of the film 'Beauty and the Beast'...you remember? It was exactly at that time. I was Beauty and the Beast...Ya, knives and bayonets...

EUGENE: ...and chains and all that...

ALBERTINA: ...all over my body...[it happened on the way] from home to the taxi because I was supposed to go to Jo'burg...Freddie...supported me to be myself although I thought I can never be myself...because if I stand in front of people then people don't listen to me because they see the scars on my face and they start to laugh and say words...'Strom! Strom!' [tsotsi, street fighter]. Like...you are given names if you have scars on your face, more especially if you are a woman. And I remember one day when I was in a plane to...East London. I was going to a gender meeting. There was a white man sitting next to me on this side. He changed his seat to go and sit on the other seat. But unfortunately for him the person got on in East London and then he was removed back to that seat of this 'strom strom' face. And after that there was a woman who felt sorry for me. She gave me that attire for Muslims which covered the whole face. So I became a Muslim just to cover myself, so if someone's greeting me then they say, 'Haah! Yoooo! Are you drinking too much? Are you fighting?' They wouldn't care to find out what's the problem...as I said, I can write a book! I have really struggled... (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

The attackers have never been identified.

## Gender discrimination: ‘come inside...they are worse’

Not only did women have to struggle against racial divisions, but also against gender discrimination. At its inception, Cosatu had placed women’s interests firmly centre stage. Already in 1983, at a seminal FOSATU conference, a small group of women had aggressively articulated their struggles (Johannesburg Correspondent 1983). Then in 1984, CUSA set up a women’s unit to watch over discrimination in employment, to push for childcare and to encourage women’s participation in union and political matters. Now at Cosatu’s inauguration, the federation identified the following principles:

- To fight discrimination against women;
- To support the right to paid work;
- Equal pay for equal work;
- The same access to jobs;
- Childcare and family facilities to help workers meet their demands;
- Full maternity rights;
- Protection from harmful work;
- Adequate and safe transport; and
- To fight sexual harassment.

It also set up a subcommittee to monitor progress in implementing these resolutions. At subsequent conferences, the issue of gender equality was debated further.

However, a distinct irony has existed throughout the last 18 years of the struggle, in that although gains have been achieved for women on the workshop floor, within the union movement they have suffered discrimination, prejudice, sexual harassment and a lack of representation. The prevalence of sexual harassment in the unions, which has in its various forms indicated men’s practical assumption of their right to power over women, has been well documented. Eugene reports that the ending of affairs at work would usually cause women, rather than men, to drop out of the unions. Tina Abrahams of FAWU recalls a workshop where a powerful, attractive female unionist was the focus of a male delegate’s attentions. FAWU women encircled her, warning that if the man succeeded it would break her power and consequently theirs:

...and [name withheld] knew a lot and was very bold. We had a debate at a workshop and of course we overpowered the men and they tried to work out strategies on how to get the females and one guy wanted a relationship with [name withheld]. And we said to her, ‘You don’t do it, because why if they break you they’ll break the whole team.’ So we guarded her the whole time so they didn’t get hold of her. I know that is their strategy that they try to get to a woman to break their power to have relationships. (Abrahams, Potgieter and Mbanga interview)

Women's power was further weakened by the fact that most were in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, formed only 10.2 per cent of all supervisory positions and were fired when they fell pregnant (Cock et al. 1983: 288). They were thus also highly dispensable to the unions themselves. Men were reluctant to assist with the delivery of skills or even to allow a democratic platform for women at meetings and used to 'bosberaad' (meet and take decisions) behind closed doors. Albertina remembers how many women were intimidated by the heckling of men at meetings, their constant interruptions on 'points of order' and their attempts to put women's concerns at the end of the agenda:

So women even in meetings when they complained of discrimination, the men were going, 'Ooo-oer, point of order! Point of order! This woman is out of...agenda!' So then we asked for our items to be first on the agenda and then the men would ask for it to be moved to the end. Then they'd look at the time as it is late. Still doing it now...Aids has killed so many people and cervix cancer, but they take no notice because it's affecting women but now when you find out when men are being affected then it gets on the agenda. (Matiwane interview)

In such a discriminatory climate, women were not allowed to challenge issues. When Albertina attempted to defend a co-worker, she was threatened with dismissal:

There was a woman here at NUMARWOSA who started in 1976, Sally Smith...there was a big strike at GM, police dogs harassing people to go back to work. And there was confusion about deadlock and some people went back to work, and...shop stewards were also confused. Her husband who was working there also went back. That woman lost her job at the union because of that and the people of the union said she is getting paid by the workers of the union and why did her husband go back and others were on strike...it had nothing to do with her...two individuals. When I went to intervene I was told to stay away if I still want to work. The papers caused the confusion and gave wrong dates about when workers were returning. All these things they are fighting?...come inside...they are worse! They are worse! (Matiwane interview)

Eventually, the debate was raised as to whether women's interests would be better served in their own structures and even their own union. A creative attempt to establish a separate women's union was tried but met with no success:

Then in 1986, we decided to have our own union and then we struck and the men said we can do your administration work. So we mixed up the files but made notes for ourselves as to where everything had been and they came to work. Then when the phone rings they couldn't find information. We got what we wanted...but Cosatu said no, you are not fighting against another union... (Matiwane interview)

Albertina is intensely resentful of her own painful experience of victimisation as a woman that occurred in the 1990s. She had been a gender forum co-ordinator and a member of the ANC women's forum. She then left these positions to complete a six-month course to be an organiser, learning how to deal with strikes, take issues to mediation and end deadlock. But although she was assessed favourably, NUMSA did not offer her a job as an organiser. She was thus left in her position as an administrator in the NUMSA offices in PE, where she remained at the time of writing. Discrimination is particularly hard for her to take, given that she was even physically brutalised for her loyalty to the union.

Gender discrimination outside the workplace also impacted on women's performance in the unions. This can be seen most clearly in the often-cited triple shift of factory work, union work, and expectations at home. The often aggressive pressure from husbands to maintain the family, the home and the job militated against women's performance, confidence and ascendance in the unions. Yet Albertina recalls how many women utilised these pressures to conceal their own passivity:

Now...especially in the Eastern Cape, women they did attend the meetings but they used to take a back seat when it comes to elections – excuses, children, home. OK we thought if that's the case let's make our meetings on Saturdays. Then again on Saturdays they say I have to go and do shopping. It was a struggle... (Matiwane interview)

### **Impact on families**

Conversely, the attempt by some to stay involved in union work often resulted in family disintegration, which took the form of broken marriages and alienation of children, arguably akin to the experiences of Umkhonto we Sizwe women who fled into exile leaving their children behind. Eugene's relationship with her daughter was nearly irreversibly damaged:

I gave my child to my boyfriend's mother because when my mother and father got divorced I did not have a place to stay...and my boyfriend didn't pay maintenance at that stage and I was battling. And because I was active in the union I was never at home, so my involvement in the unions – meetings, holding positions like being on the executive, no social life, purely trade unionism – led to this happening. My family put pressure on me to leave the union...The relationship between my child and me was severely damaged and when I saw that question I thought I've never spoken to someone with regards to that...eventually my boyfriend's mother also fell sick and then she was given back to me in 1992. That is when I resigned from the executive to take care of her...But the boyfriend's family has influenced her so much saying that I didn't have time for her, used to give her black tea, and so on, so she lost respect for me.

But I had no control over her...no proper education, fell pregnant when she was 13 years old...her boyfriend was a gangster who is still in jail for 18 years for shooting another child...The boyfriend did not maintain her and his family covered up for him... (Johnson interview)

Two years ago, in an emotional exchange, Eugene had to ask forgiveness from her daughter for her absence. 'She's married now and has a much better relationship...' (Johnson interview).

Numerous incidents of violent retribution against women were another consequence of union work. As late as 1990, Immelda Bailey, an organiser for NUMSA in Uitenhage, was murdered by her shop steward husband (Hartford interview; Kettledas interview). Albertina recalls:

Immelda had first been an administrator for one of the unions...She was working with Fred Sauls, assisting him with the Workers College and working for the South Western District (Municipality). Her husband was jealous. They say he used to hit her. She was very active...She used to travel with the unions, and with the youth, she was involved with the SA Council of Churches, the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] to Germany and such countries. He hacked her to death. He's still in jail. He was a shop steward so he should have understood. She was very militant. She learned through attending the campaigns of Cosatu. Strong resolution that administrators be...co-ordinators [of the women's forums]. She was so brilliant, she used to face men, she put items on Speak.<sup>2</sup> Coloured women were not active that time, but she was...She died of her commitment because of being active and exposed to men. He couldn't take it that she was active... (Matiwane interview)

However, not all family experiences of union commitment were so painful. Merle Potgieter refers with humour to the protective paternalism of her husband during her union involvement in the 1980s:

You had to keep things from your husband. You had to tell a lot of lies. I can remember when I was working night shift. I was in the car taking my husband to work and the telephone rang and I had to run back to answer it and it was that Colonel Strydom and he said he's coming to pick me up now. I said to him, 'Man, you can't come and pick me up now! I'm coming from night shift – you can pick me up at one o'clock.' So he said to me he's coming at 3 o'clock after I had a sleep. My husband asked who it was – I just said it was the wrong number...but if I had to tell him, he'd tell me straight away – like I say with the coloureds, they pamper you – 'cut out the union'. (Abrahams, Potgieter and Mbanga interview)

## **'Women used to cry tears': women and the community (1987–94)**

### **Women's forums (1987–90)**

In 1987, Cosatu initiated women's forums to focus on women workers' needs within the unions, such as building their confidence and leadership, reporting their needs to the unions, and education about union issues (Klugman 1989). This was based on the Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union concept established in 1984 to build working-class alliances. NUMSA initiated a forum in 1987 consisting of subcommittees in all the automotive companies, which then worked through community organisations.<sup>3</sup> In 1988, a resolution was taken to produce a book on the women's forum to give women a voice and to use it to integrate the community. Eugene became the first NUMSA vice-president of this forum and began to mobilise women to focus on goals within both the workplace and the community. In the workplace, training aimed at the empowerment of women to speak up in meetings, to ignore harassment, to vote for women and to fight for equal pay (Johnson interview). (Wage discrimination continued to be a problem in the 1990s where women machinists tended to be paid about 19 per cent less than men in the same grade [Labour Research Service 1991: 4].) The forums also focused on working hours, on-site Pap smears, birth control, maternity leave, childcare and access to machine operating, issues nationalised by the ANC and Cosatu, indicating they were no longer 'women-only' issues (Klugman 1989).<sup>4</sup> Albertina reports:

A sexual harassment and discrimination campaign was adopted [in NUMSA] in the 80s to empower women to challenge low grades and this led to a campaign between 1990 and 1991 for women to become supervisors. (Matiwane interview)

The forums, in attempting to create class alliances, liaised with community women and with women who had started to play a fundamental role in the reorganisation of communities, such as the UDF women's organisation; the Natal Women's Organisation; FEDTRAW (the Federation of Transvaal Women), operating along the lines of the old Federation of South African Women founded in the 1950s; the Union of the Western Cape; and in PE, PEWO, PEBCO and the Northern Areas Youth Congress (NAYCO). Eugene reports:

I used to have a shack where these guys when they were on the run would come and stay – a safe house so they knew where to contact me. They had discussions on the state of things, what it is they want to achieve etcetera and how we can support them and how to get women together. It was one of the reasons for the gender forums. It was our only real avenue. (Johnson interview)

In the community, Eugene and Irna Senekal addressed both women workers and women community members, in factories related to Cosatu and in halls and stadiums as far afield as East London and Grahamstown. A hall would be half full because of the fact

that women were scared. Worker issues were mainly addressed but also pressing community issues which nevertheless related to workers, such as childcare centres, the removal of abuse, and unemployment. Eugene remembers:

...one time we went to Queenstown and the Special Branch were around us...but we used to manage to talk to women and women became militant...The Special Branch were listening and didn't arrest us. In fact, I was invited on many occasions by NAYCO to speak to women in the northern areas on how to get involved because they were afraid to speak, to get involved.<sup>5</sup> Speaking to them will get them unafraid. My closest friends then became shop stewards, community leaders. All you could do is to talk, educate and talk...I remember that once we went to address the people in a park in the northern areas and women were physically crying because we were speaking about poverty they were undergoing, women raising their children alone, how their children turn out, visiting the children in jail, the conditions in jail, what we experience at factory level, how tired we are at work. If you don't come to work you are being...You can't go to the doctor without being back at the 2 o'clock shift then you'd lose the whole day. Women used to cry tears. We were even addressing the issue of women being beaten by the husbands, the conditions being experienced at home and at work, and in the community...often this emotional response... (Johnson interview)

FEDDRAW viewed the growing alliance with satisfaction: 'Communities are beginning to be influenced by unionised women and trade union officials. FEDDRAW sees a definite link between the level of politicisation and consciousness of women in certain areas and the presence of women with union experience' (Jaffee 1987: 88–9).

Consequently, joint campaigns such as marches and programmes of action, including the Stop Abusing Women campaign, were initiated by the women's forums in conjunction with Cosatu, PEBCO, NAYCO and the UDF. Albertina, also a women's forum co-ordinator at that time, recalls how women's forums campaigns led to government acceptance that new housing areas had to include a centre consisting of a clinic, a pre-school and a playground:

Another thing, women dominated in the Eastern Cape in any resolution regarding women in any forum. Our pride was that the resolutions had to come from our region. And I remember we wouldn't even sleep. We would go at night to different regions and we'd caucus our region just to find out what was your resolution on women, what were you saying on childcare facilities...[to Eugene] Do you remember that campaign...where we took our children to work for childcare so if you didn't have a child you had to go and borrow a child! (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

Forums were also a vehicle to convey worker concerns to the community. In this case, reminiscent of union–community division over the 1985 stay-away, Eugene recalls:

We had that unrest in the northern areas...1991...then nobody could go to work and...for two days all the roads in the northern areas were blocked. Then they had this massive meeting and our community became afraid because after you were absent from work three days it was regarded as AWOL right? And you were automatically dismissed and I had to go to these meetings organised by UDF and say, 'But guys you cannot allow workers not to go to work because the bosses will not take this and secondly what if we lose our jobs? You cannot decide for members of Cosatu unless you meet with your organisers to discuss and say...let's talk about this thing.' (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

The success of the forums and the class alliances can, paradoxically, be seen in the ideological differences opening up within the coloured community because of the politicisation of the coloured trade unionists on the one hand, and the alienation of middle-class coloured communities by state manipulation on the other. Thus, when shop stewards like Eugene tried to take women's issues to these communities through women's forums, she had the strange experience of being chased out of familiar areas:

...and we were small, a handful and it was difficult, difficult, difficult. We had to run for our lives and you were thrown with bottles and...once you enter the middle-class areas they would call the police to chase you out...It was Alan Hendrickse people and National Party and the previous government used to divide us even according to the darkness of our coloured skin...even they would put themselves in a higher class than us that are darker who look more like our comrades in the township. (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

### **Scab labour and solidarity**

With such important structural links between community and factory, scab labour became a pivotal issue. Employers exploited racial divisions when, for example, white and coloured women were used to scab in PE at Eveready and Firestone and, in 1988, 72 white workers – mainly women – were employed by a Uitenhage company (probably Hella) to counter an overtime ban. This was about two weeks into a 22-day strike involving 946 black, coloured and Indian workers. About 300 predominantly white and coloured applicants responded to a half-page advert, and recruitment took place during the three-day stay-away (Parfitt 1989: 41). In another company, white women were similarly engaged to counter an overtime ban. A manager reported:

When we had the overtime embargo before the dismissals, we employed white housewives. About 40 women worked a 5–10 shift every night for a couple of months. That worked like a bomb. The blacks didn't like this because we took the hurt out of their overtime embargo. When things normalised, some of the housewives accepted day shift jobs. (Parfitt 1989: 43)

While the women's forums could not address the issue of white scabbing, they attempted to mobilise support against it in the coloured communities. Eugene recalls:

A lot of unemployed people used to come and we used to tell them not to be scab labour. Especially in the northern areas, the people would say 'no, we want a job'. We kept on speaking to them about the women feeling the problems in the union. (Johnson interview)

Not only was loyalty expected from the community as a whole, but also from families and partners. Eugene and Albertina explain:

EUGENE: My boyfriend worked there [Delta] and we were supposed to talk to your families, your boyfriends, your husbands, to support the strike and if it was found...because especially in Sally's [Smith] case...she should have persuaded her husband not to go back to work because people lost their jobs...and then we as women had to go down to the factory at night, 12 o'clock at night and take food for the workers...so while she has been an administrator of the same union ...could not convince her husband to support the strike she had to be called in and ask...because my boyfriend was also involved in the union and he did not go back because of me.

ALBERTINA: ...so our commitment was not only to the union. Then your commitment also had to be in your house, in your community and, furthermore, they checked who you were involved with...[laughter]...You couldn't be involved with the opposition. (Johnson and Matiwane interview)

### **From 'women' to 'gender' (1990 onwards)**

In 1990, the feminist strategy of women's forums was broadened to assist the liberation struggle. The forums became 'gender' forums when men joined so that they could be included and enlightened about their role in bringing change for women. Whereas the women's forums had had little hierarchical structure, now gender forums were divided into different committees at different levels: factory level, local level, where there was a council of shop stewards, regional level where resolutions were taken, and the national level. Gender tensions were more thoroughly exposed. For example, in the Locals, women used to elect only men and didn't want to make themselves available for election as they still complained they had too many domestic burdens to carry. Sometimes this was due to the threat of physical violence which, men used to joke at the meetings, was justified by their payment of lobola. Gender co-ordinators such as Albertina worked hard to erode such attitudes in gender forum workshops: 'So I was there to empower them to talk in meetings otherwise you will never be taken notice of' (Johnson and Matiwane interview). Strong political women were used as speakers, while women 'activists', who were reluctant to be shop stewards but were outspoken

about their views within their work department, were invited to sit on the Locals without having to be shop stewards.

## Conclusion: 'we are not there yet'

Although Eugene's work destroyed her family life in the 1980s, she has had a wide-ranging impact on her immediate social environment. Besides being a unionist, Eugene is on the regional executive committee of the Nelson Mandela Metropole,<sup>6</sup> a gender co-ordinator on the Ward Committee and an additional member on the regional task team of the South African National Civic Organisation. Her activity also seems to have been a crucial factor in initiating between 10 and 20 immediate male and female family members into the union struggle. 'I feel good now since I think of it' (Johnson interview).

However, the status of women in the unions has not correspondingly improved. When the National Conference for Trade Union Women met in Durban in November 1996, the resulting Charter for Working Women's Rights was still calling for eradication of the same inequalities that existed in the 1980s (Benjamin 1997). The next year, the September Commission, which was submitted by women in Cosatu calling for a 50 per cent quota system in the structures, was turned down (Orr et al. 1997: 24). Gender forums continue but Albertina maintains, 'Women have begun to snore since 1994' (Matiwane interview).

On 23 April 2005, Eugene, Albertina and Gloria Barry received awards from NUMSA recognising their contribution to the union movement. Regarding their perception of these awards, Eugene responds:

I would say they are starting to recognise the role that women played in the unions. Although it is not there yet I mean...Gloria was the first regional secretary of the union and she has been the only one...I think in the province there is only one woman organiser for example. Women are mainly kept at administrative level. No we are not there yet...Even last year when we had an ANC thanksgiving in the northern areas, in the church. After I'd spoken one of the women ran to the front and embraced me. You also feel like crying...Women are going through tough things, you know. And when you sent me that email the



other day, when I was thinking of those things...I felt inside of me...I got so emotional because I was thinking, we are still not there yet! We are still not there yet...because men are still chasing the power and we are still being left behind and I hope that this is going to be sorted out soon...I mean, you go to places and women are still crying because they don't stay in the house because their parents are sick and then there are other people in their house. (Johnson interview)

## NOTES

- 1 I have given few direct excerpts from Ramona's interview, as not only did she speak in Afrikaans with Eugene translating, but syntax was often unclear and had to be unravelled by Eugene and myself.
- 2 'Speak' was a magazine on struggle, development and black women's rights in South Africa founded by a group of women community activists in 1982 in order to raise awareness within trade unions and community and political organisations. See <<http://www.ces.fe.uc.pt/emancipa/cv/gen/shamim.html>>.
- 3 There was no women's forum established at Cadbury Fry in PE. Interviewees gave the reason that there was no need as the workforce was predominantly female. Why this was the case at Cadbury's and not at factories such as Autoplastics should be an aspect for further research.
- 4 Early in 1987, the first industry-wide maternity agreement was landed in the metal industry. In 1983, CCAWUSA had already signed a landmark maternity benefit with OK Bazaars.
- 5 When the northern areas trouble broke out in 1991, community women became more fully involved through NAYCO (Johnson interview).
- 6 In January 2006, Eugene was elected as a councillor of the Nelson Mandela Metropole.

## REFERENCES

- Adler G (1994) 'The factory belongs to all who work in it': Race, class and collective action in the South African motor industry, 1967–1986. PhD thesis, Colombia University.
- Anstey M, Finnemore M, Parfitt J & Lallie Z (1994) Industrial relations trends in the PE/Uitenhage area to 1993: A synopsis of research findings. *I.R. Research and Topics Series*, No. 12, University of Port Elizabeth (UPE).
- Benjamin S (1997) Trade union women investigate working women's rights. *Agenda*, 32: 63–65.
- Cock J, Favis M, Joffe A, Miller S, Satchwell K, Schreiner J, Volbrecht G & Yawitch J (1983) Women and changing relations of control. *SA Review*, 1: 278–299.
- Cosatu (1995) *The Shopsteward*, 4(6), December. Special Cosatu tenth anniversary edition, Ten years of workers' unity and struggle. Available at <<http://www.cosatu.org.za/shop/ss0406-4.html>>
- Finnemore M & Van der Merwe R (1996) *Introduction to labour relations in South Africa*. (4th edition). Durban: Butterworth Publishers.
- Hirson B (nd) A short history of the Non-European Unity Movement: An insider's view. Available at <<http://www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/supplem/Hirson/neum.html>>
- Jackson J (2005) BBC Hard Talk. March.
- Jaffee G (1987) Women in the trade unions. *SA Review*, 4. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Johannesburg Correspondent (1983) Workshop on women. *SA Labour Bulletin*, 9(3): 7–17.
- Klugman B (1989) Giving women the green light. *SA Labour Bulletin*, 14(4): 15–26.
- Labour Research Service (1991) Wage discrimination against women. *Bargaining Monitor*, 5(50): 4.
- LACOM (SACHED) (nd) *Freedom from below. The struggle for trade unions in South Africa*. SACHED.
- Lambert R & Lambert L (1983) State reform and working class resistance, 1982. *South African Review*, 1. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Levy A & Associates (1986) An analysis of strike action in South Africa, 1979–1986. *Industrial Action Monitor*. Andrew Levy and Associates.
- Orr L, Daphne J & Horton C (1997) COSATU Congress: Did women reject the quota? *Agenda*, 35: 24–29.
- Parfitt J (1989) Industrial relations trends in the eastern Cape: Strikes and stayaways. *I.R. Research and Topics Series* (no. 3), UPE.
- Parfitt JM (1992) An investigation into some dynamics of strikes in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage in 1988 and 1989. MA thesis, UPE.

- Pillay D (1985) The Port Elizabeth stayaway. Community organisations and unions in conflict. *Work in Progress*, 37: 4–13.
- SAIRR (South African Institute of Race Relations) (1992) Fast Facts no. 12. Johannesburg: SAIRR.
- SAIRR (1994) Fast Facts no. 2, February. Johannesburg: SAIRR.
- Shane S (1983) A study of South African strike data, 1960–1982. CSIR special report. Johannesburg: National Institute for Personnel Research.
- Simons R & Simons J (nd) *Class and colour in South Africa, 1850–1950*. Available at <<http://www.anc.org.za/books/ccsa25.html>>
- Stats SA (Statistics South Africa) (1986) *South African statistics*. Pretoria: Stats SA.

## INTERVIEWS

Abrahams Tina, Potgieter Merle, Mbanga Alfred; joint interview at Cadbury Fry, North End, Port Elizabeth; 20 May 2005.

Groenewald Johann; Autoplastics, Kensington, Port Elizabeth; 18 February 2005.

Hartford Gavin, telephonic interview, 20 January 2005.

Johnson Eugene; Autoplastics, Kensington, Port Elizabeth; 28 January 2005 and 15 February 2005.

Johnson (Eugene) and Matiwane (Albertina); joint interview at NUMSA offices, Newton Park, Port Elizabeth; 7 May 2005.

Kettledas Les, telephonic interview, 28 January 2005.

Kiviets Ramona; Arcadia, Port Elizabeth; 17 February 2005 and 16 March 2005.

Matiwane Albertina; NUMSA offices, Newton Park, Port Elizabeth; 7 February 2005 and 18 February 2005.

# Naked women's protest, July 1990:

## 'We won't fuck for houses'

SHEILA MEINTJES

On 12 July 1990 the Soweto municipal police, with the South African Police, arrived with tear gas, dogs, a casspir and a bulldozer to raze to the ground some 60 'illegal' shacks erected in no-man's-land between Dobsonville extensions 1 and 2, a 'spanking new high-cost residential area' in Soweto (*City Press* 15.07.1990). The shacks had been erected some two weeks earlier by a group of homeless Sowetans, mainly women, who for years had lived precariously as highly exploited tenants in shack dwellings in the backyards of those with rights to possess houses. The eviction of the newly settled squatters from this empty land in the cold winter of the second week of July was witnessed by neighbouring Dobsonville inhabitants, the Dobsonville Civic, a group of women and young activists from Mshenguville, a squatter settlement alongside White City, Jabavu, members of the national and international press and, later that evening, television viewers across South Africa and the globe. The reason? The women had stripped off their clothes as the police moved in to bulldoze their shacks. The squatter settlement had been declared illegal and the Dobsonville town clerk, Tony Roux, acquired a court order to remove the squatters. The squatters in turn had tried, through the Soweto Civic Association (SCA), to get a court interdict to prevent the demolition of their shacks. The erection of shacks on this piece of land was part of a deliberate strategy by the women involved to draw attention to the plight of the homeless in northwest Soweto. The strategy had been accompanied by squatter pickets outside the town council offices (*Sowetan* 13.07.1990). The press reported the details of the negotiations and the protest action and were present on the expiry of the deadline for squatters to remove their shacks. The process was a public spectacle.

As the police moved to dismantle their shacks, the younger women shack dwellers stripped off their clothes, taunted the police, ululated, shouted in anger about their plight and their pain, sang and danced, and held up printed placards demanding homes and security of tenure. That evening national and international television networks featured this action in news headlines. The next day, photographs of the women naked and semi-naked adorned the front pages of *Sowetan* and *The Star* and appeared in other newspapers

countrywide. What raised comment and was so unusual about this event and acquired such publicity was not just the fact that squatters were being moved, an event common in black South African urban life at the time, but the particular form that the protest took. It was relatively peaceful, with only a few incidents of stone throwing by youths from the neighbouring shanty settlement of Mshenguville. At Phola Park and in Thokoza on the East Rand during the same period, squatters and police had used firearms and people had died. Notable, too, was that women dominated the protest with men as bystanders. But perhaps most significant was the women's strategy of stripping off their clothes in an effort to fend off the police, hoping to chase them away and stop them from demolishing their shacks. Above all their strategy was to draw attention to themselves.

The women's protest was against their homelessness and the impediments to acquiring housing, despite having Section 10 rights (discussed later). Instead, they spent years on council housing waiting lists. The women invaded land owned by a mining company and set up their shacks. Some believed that this was where they would settle. Others saw it as a means to an end. When the local authority ordered them to vacate the land and sent bulldozers, with police and dogs in tow, to flatten their shacks, the women stripped off their clothes. The symbolism of their identity as women and as sexual beings was a central aspect of their action. The particularity of their actions drew attention to, was a signifier of and was, at the same time, a challenge to their status as social and sexual dependents. Their action challenged both men and the state. The claims embedded in their action were specific – for the substantive right to housing. Access to housing provided the basis on which they would be able to nurture their families and provide a launching pad for them to create sustainable livelihoods. For the women, the right to housing also called for recognition of their specific responsibilities as women citizens.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s lack of housing was critical. Apartheid policy in the 1960s had sought to limit urban settlement to those who had permanent roots in towns. Influx control had made it difficult for newcomers to acquire urban rights but, significantly, the system had also stalled the provision of adequate and sufficient housing, even for those with urban rights. Housing protests were widespread. Unlike many protests about the lack of shelter and urban rights at that time, the Dobsonville women's protest was still remembered 15 years after the event by ordinary people. It was remembered precisely because the women protesters stripped and stood naked, baring their most intimate, private selves in a public gesture of protest. The particular form that the Dobsonville protest took raises questions about how women engaged in struggles over fundamental material needs, including housing. Was there a connection between the mode of these women's protest and their place in civil society? What significance can a feminist analysis give to the sexual symbolism expressed in the women's actions?

In the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the 1990s in South Africa, new spaces for both ordinary women and for women's organisations to make material claims opened up. People's actions around everyday needs and interests were inserted



Nthabiseng Hlongwane outside the creche that she built with the community.

indirectly into the discourse about what an equal and democratic society should be. The Dobsonville protest presents a particularly stark moment in which gender, class and civil status come together. It also enables an analysis of the combination of conditions under which women were politicised and the processes which led to their public participation during a transitional period in South Africa's history.

In this chapter,<sup>1</sup> I attempt to present the layers of meaning embedded in some of the narratives of different groups involved in the protest action to show how gender, that is, the construction of sexual difference, is both contested and yet operates to allocate specific political roles and power to women and men. The narratives that I bring to the surface are, first, those of the research process itself, in which we, the researchers, framed questions to probe the social constructions of gender relations that determined women's civil status. The second of the narratives explores how the press reported the events, showing how gender stereotypes operated to present an androcentric (male-centred) view of gender power and authority. This androcentric interpretation is bolstered by the third narrative, that of the men who were involved in the action, who saw themselves as the leaders of the action. The final narrative is that of the women protesters, whose claims formed the subject of the research. Through the narrative analysis, I weave the story of two local activists, both of whom were part of the women's housing protest and land occupation in Soweto in June and July 1990. The story recounts the lives and struggles of Maria Thiko and Nthabiseng Hlongwane, who were leading protagonists in the land action. After this action, the community – including the women who had engineered the protest – acquired land for settlement from the local (apartheid) authority at Doornkop, near Dobsonville in Soweto.

In presenting the story of the event in this way, I hope to show the diverse forms in which women's agency and social location, their needs and political responses, shaped their lives, which were mediated and controlled by other actors. While they were active agents in the protest, their actions also portrayed the ambivalence of their position. In many parts of Africa at different historical moments, women have expressed protest through nakedness, using their bodies to 'serve as condensed symbols of female power' (Ardener 1973: 16). The relationship between women's status and power seems to be a key variable in explaining the use of the body in this way. In the Dobsonville protest, women used their bodies to shame the authorities into responding to their needs. Significantly, the outcome was that land was allocated to those on the Dobsonville housing waiting lists. The message seemed to have got through to those who had the authority to allocate land.

## Background to the housing struggles of the 1990s

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, housing was a central arena of struggle (Grest 1988). Lack of housing in urban areas arose from the apartheid state's attempts to limit black urbanisation during the 1960s and 1970s. The Group Areas Act segregated different racial groups from one another and private ownership was denied to African people. Urban Africans could only access houses if they had urban rights under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act. Section 10 rights involved being able to live and work in white urban areas if a person was born or had lived in the urban area for more than 15 years. Moreover, the right to housing was confined to male heads of household. Women were defined as minors under customary law and thus dependents of men. So single women, widows and divorcees could not access housing in their own right, as every woman was defined as subject to a man. The effect of these policies was to exclude single women from the right to rent their own homes. They were forced to become tenants in people's backyards, where they lived in appalling, overcrowded conditions in tin shacks, colloquially known as *umkhukhu*, literally, chickens or chicken coops. Running water was limited and sanitation was poor.

Waiting lists for houses, even for legal residents in black townships, were long. The administration of these lists became notoriously open to abuse, as evidence from the cohort of women who engaged in the Dobsonville protest revealed. Moreover, for single women and men migrants who did not fall within the rights established by Section 10, life was lived in the twilight zone of illegality and insecurity. Those without Section 10 rights were forced into informal or illegal employment and subject to arbitrary police swoops, the law courts, fines they could ill afford and, finally, endorsement out of the urban area. So while all black South Africans were secondary citizens with limited rights, women and migrants experienced a double exclusion. Although influx control and the housing regulations changed in the mid-1980s, women's access to housing

continued to depend on connection to a man. The women's action of stripping symbolically protested against this dependency.

The SCA had formed in 1979 to demand rights for homeless people, especially for legal tenants (Seekings 1988). The SCA organised against the Soweto Community Council, members of which came to be seen as surrogates of the apartheid state at the local level, especially when rent and service charges were increased. Opposition to the council and councillors crystallised around their control over access to housing. In theory, as housing became available it was given to those at the top of the waiting list. In practice, councillors gave it to those who paid. More notorious were those councillors who provided housing to women in exchange for sex. Several of our informants deeply resented the sexual power asserted by one councillor in particular. They suggested that there were several women in Dobsonville who had acquired houses through this form of transactional sex. The women protesters chose to use their bodies to draw attention to their homelessness, as much as to make an ironic statement about the sexual contract involved in acquiring houses as to focus on nakedness as a symbol of how the system had stripped them of their dignity as human beings.

In response to growing problems of overcrowding, and the growth of shanty settlements on the periphery of urban townships, the SCA spearheaded the launch of Operation Masekane for the Homeless (OMHLE) in 1990. This initiative sought to confront the Soweto council's unwillingness to address the issue of housing shortages and the plight of the homeless. Despite government recognition of the permanence of the urban African population, measures to limit and control informal urban settlement had continued. Indeed, as Ann Bernstein of the Urban Foundation argued at the time, the Guide Planning Process, which determined land settlement planning, limited the release of land for black settlement (Bernstein 1989). Bernstein argued that government policy was still geared towards influx control and that the reality of the greater concentration of people in urban metropoles was not being addressed. In 1989 estimates put two million people living in informal settlements in the Pretoria–Witwatersrand–Vaal area. The SCA knew this – and its leaders were intent on securing more land. Land invasion was one strategy to force the hand of the local authorities.

With the unbanning of the ANC and other organisations in 1990, the opening up of the political process to democratic competition provided a 'window of opportunity' for the expression of popular demands. The constitutional talks occurred simultaneously with mass political mobilisation and the emergence of new forms of party competition and organisation. Thousands of people died in the political violence that erupted as the once banned political movements surfaced to challenge apartheid structures and collaborationist parties. Ordinary people became involved in life-and-death situations. This violent context was also the moment when the desperate needs of people for shelter, for jobs and for adequate schooling came to the fore in popular protests. These demands articulated claims to rights.

Women led some of the community protests about lack of housing and other services

in townships in the early 1990s. Housing in particular was a basic requirement for the well-being and welfare of families and communities. Temma Kaplan, an American feminist, argues that the political and community struggles undertaken by women in different settings should be seen as citizenship claims (Kaplan 1997). A citizen is defined as a member of a country who has certain inalienable rights by virtue of birth or naturalisation. These rights are embedded in the fundamental laws of a country, which in South Africa is the Constitution of 1996. The local protest actions, such as that of the women in townships like Dobsonville, informed the broader context of national organisation and intervention. This interplay between local and national demands helps us to understand how different spheres of action informed the general discourse about rights, gender and power rights during the transition to democracy and the first democratic period in South Africa.

The demands of women, such as those who took part in the naked protest, informed the wider claims interjected by a coalition of women's organisations formed to ensure that women's voices were heard during the constitutional negotiations. The Women's National Coalition (WNC), as it was called, became the vehicle for voicing the hopes and dreams of women from very different class, race and cultural backgrounds and enabled them to find common cause through these differences. The outcome of their joint action was the Women's Charter for Effective Equality, which provided a template of the substantive claims to gender equality that came to be reflected in the Constitution and subsequent gender policy and legislation. The strategy was to present a single 'women's agenda' that would constitute women as a coherent constituency, yet also locate their difference at the heart of that agenda (Albertyn 1994; Cock 1997; Meintjes 1998). Popular struggles against apartheid laws (still in place in the early part of the 1990s) that restricted access to social services and benefits, housing, land and economic opportunities both reflected and shaped these claims.

I was a member of the WNC Research Supervisory Group (RSG) and our intentions were to ensure that the voices of all women would be heard and reflected in the new democratic order. The campaign to elicit demands from women undertaken by the WNC during 1993 occurred through widespread and novel forms of consultation at local levels, leveraged by four provincial coalitions and national women's organisations that made up the WNC, and collated centrally by the WNC Research Office. In the RSG, we estimated that more than two million women had been consulted during the six-month campaign. The outcome of the campaign was the Women's Charter for Effective Equality that spelled out the specific needs and interests of women in South Africa. The negotiations period in fact saw the WNC stake claims that pointed to the need for action around the very nature of citizenship itself. In the struggles over the content of the Bill of Rights, for instance, the WNC showed that citizenship was not neutral, but shaped by gender, class and race relations in society. The case of access to and rights to housing provides one of many prisms through which we can trace the way women's claims were made.

## Exploring the meanings of the naked protest

### The research process

Our research into the women's protest action at Dobsonville began at the end of 1991. Our intention was to undertake a study of the naked protest in order to understand the symbolism and meaning behind it. Two undergraduate research assistants, Belede Mazwai and Letabo Maleka, both residents of Soweto, went to Doornkop with a few clues to find the women who had been involved in the July 1990 protest. We followed up people who had been quoted in the press reports, including the reporters and photographers, members of the SCA of Dobsonville, the Doornkop Civic and the chairperson of the local Doornkop ANC branch.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, none of the women protesters had been interviewed by the press. Reporters simply recorded their actions. Even the World Television News journalists had not attempted to give voice to the women, except to visually record their naked protest for all the world to see. More than 18 months after the event, it proved quite easy to find some of the women. The squatter invasion of land in 1990 and successive protests by the same women had been successful in prompting the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) to establish a large settlement area on land released for controlled site-and-service schemes next to Dobsonville, which came to be called Doornkop, also known as 'Silver Town' or 'Snake Park'. Most of the women who had been involved in the Dobsonville action had been granted sites in the new scheme. The TPA had been forced to provide sites or face illegal land invasions in response to the demands and threats of the SCA. In this sense the outcome of the women's land invasion and the protest of July 1990 and its sequence were singularly successful in providing the women, and the community in general, with access to land.

The month of December 1991, when we set out to find the women, was one of the hottest months in years and South Africa endured one of the worst droughts in living history. Most of the participants were then living in Snake Park, in *umkhukhu*. The shacks were unbearably hot in summer and in winter, as we found out later, they were unbearably cold. The streets were neatly laid out at angles from a number of central open fields. A single tap serviced each street of about ten sites. Each site was also provided with a long-drop toilet which, in the heat, created a pervasive sweet-sour stench throughout the area. Rubbish was collected once a week at first and each site had been provided with a rubbish bin. Two years later, mobile tips had replaced the weekly service. Tips were then located at various points throughout the settlement and collected at intervals. This service was organised by members of the civic who were paid a retainer for this work by the TPA. This became an arena of contention, as those who held office in the civic were accused of using this as patronage.

The settlement of about 5 000 stands lay close to where the squatters had originally set up their shacks in 1990, between Dobsonville extensions 1 and 2 and the uncovered mine dumps of Rand mines. When the wind blows, which it did much of the time we

spent in the settlement in 1991, 1992 and some of 1993, the place became a dust bowl. More than ten years later, though some effort had been made by the mines to cover dumps with grass, the fine, pale sand of the dumps still crept through every crevice to coat every surface, to cover one's skin and hair, and to get into one's eyes and mouth.

In late 1991, when we met up with some of the women who had been involved, a few, especially the younger women, were pleased to have been sought out and wanted to record their experience and their histories. Our reception was not an unambiguous one, however. Some of the older women thought we had come to provide them with houses. They thought we were from the TPA, and had no idea what a university was or what research meant. Some of the male members of the civic to whom we spoke, questioned our intentions. They mentioned the problem of researchers' using information for their own career purposes without providing any benefit to the community. One person was so antagonistic that although he could speak English, he initially refused to speak to me directly. He said that when whites put their noses into black communities, they caused trouble of one sort or another. The context of these suspicions was significant, for in the early 1990s political competition for authoritative power had spilled out into dangerous conflict – with the state, between competing political movements and within communities. Gender power cut across many of those conflicts. We had tried to explain that our intention was to promote the needs and interests of women through writing about their experiences and linking them with the WNC. In introducing ourselves and the project to individuals and to broader meetings, we explained that we were researchers from the University of the Witwatersrand. We explained that we hoped, through the work, not only to make their needs as women more widely known and addressed in public policy, but also that we wished to bring to wider attention the effects apartheid had had on their lives. We also spoke about the opening of the negotiations and the constitutional process. We informed them, too, about the formation of the WNC, a coalition that had been formed specifically to inform the new Constitution-makers about the conditions, problems and needs of women like them.

At the local level, we found ourselves in the midst of a fairly complicated power struggle, in which the Dobsonville Civic Association claimed that the Doornkop Civic was merely a branch of the organisation. We were summoned through one of our informants, Nthabiseng Hlongwane, to report to the Dobsonville Civic. Doornkop Civic members whom we spoke to, although suspicious of us, were incensed that the Dobsonville leaders believed they had authority over them. They argued that they alone needed to be informed. The Doornkop Civic, though not an elected grouping, refused to accept a subordinate status and argued that they were independent. They told us that they had played a key role in negotiating the establishment of the settlement and that they continued to liaise with the TPA in allocating sites to new applicants. Our approach to participants in the protest had been through members of both civic bodies. It became clear from the beginning that the research process itself would need to be carefully monitored for how it interrelated with these ongoing and sometimes tense

relationships. Present concerns also mediated the way in which people narrated the past to us. The research process itself became a dimension of the complex interrelationships of power that formed the context of life for the women we interviewed. Our entry into the community became an additional resource in the day-to-day power struggles and survival strategies of the women whom we interviewed.

### **The public story: the press**

The most public and perhaps the most oversimplified of the narratives was that offered by the press. The Dobsonville squatter action can be traced most clearly through the columns of *Sowetan* during the months of June and July 1990 (*Sowetan* 07/08.06.1990, 07/13/17/18/26.07.1990). In June, there were articles on the whole issue of informal settlement and squatting in South Africa. Accounts of the Dobsonville action and subsequent demolitions were merely descriptive and lacked analysis. When 15 people were arrested for trying to rebuild their shacks, the media blindly and negligently refrained from naming or identifying in any other way the actors in this action. Our research identified all of these actors as women. However, press interviews were limited to comments from members of the council, the SCA and the local ANC chairperson, few of whom were identified by name either. There was no probing of the whole squatter invasion as a broader strategy to force the authorities to release more land for housing developments. Yet this had been part of the discussions at the meetings of the SCA, which the women had attended. This aspect of their plans emerged from our research, particularly from our detailed interviews of the women participants.

Although some journalistic accounts touched on the plight of the homeless, there was little clear analysis of the complexity, either of the housing crisis facing South African urban government, or of the particular plight of the women participants. Moreover, any focus on the perspective of the leading protagonists in the event – the women, the civic members, the Dobsonville council and its representatives, or the police – was missing. A case study of the negotiating parties in the affair, namely the Dobsonville Civic, the women squatters and the council, would have offered an insight into a much broader set of political objectives in the ongoing struggles in the urban areas around changes in urban government and improvement in urban life. In particular, there could have been some focus on the agenda of civic leaders, who challenged the legitimacy of the authority of the community councils. A more careful disaggregation of the different participants would have led to a focus on another central aspect of the struggles – the different approaches adopted by men, women and the youth.

### **The men's story**

We interviewed several men who had participated in the meetings and actions that led up to the Dobsonville land invasion. The views of Japhta Lekgetho – who was a member of the SCA and also the founder of the National Environmental Awareness Campaign

(NEAC), a non-governmental organisation dedicated to cleaning up Soweto, with its headquarters at an environmental centre in Dobsonville – were particularly interesting. He presented a view of the protest as one orchestrated by the SCA, though OMHLE played a leading role. Lekgetho was a leading figure in the negotiations around squatter struggles in Soweto and elsewhere. It was very difficult to obtain a sustained meeting with him in 1991 or in the first quarter of 1992, because he was preoccupied with negotiating with the TPA and other authorities about the future of the Zevenfontein squatters further to the north. However, we did manage to meet him for more than an hour in January 1992. During the course of our discussion, his view of the naked protest event was that the idea of setting up the shacks between Dobsonville 1 and 2 had been his and that the women were conduits for a broad strategy of land invasion to draw attention to the plight of the homeless (Lekgetho interview). One cannot dismiss this view but, as we shall see, it tends to diminish the strategic direction given by the women themselves.

The view that women were deliberately used in the land invasion as a ‘strategic ploy’ was confirmed by Benson Banda, a member of the Doornkop Civic. Banda argued that the strategy was to get the women to take action, because it was felt that ‘women are more listened to than men in the Commissioner’s office’ (Banda interview). More importantly, Banda argued that the women’s protest strategy of stripping naked had utterly failed. He made no connection between this startling method of protest and the fact that most of the participants in the protest action, including the men who had helped to set up the shacks, were subsequently provided with sites by the TPA.

Our male informants, who were members of the two civic bodies, claimed that they were the driving force behind the action. This does not mean that they did not admire the women. When prodded, they all acknowledged how brave and strong the women had been. But it was quite clear that they believed that without their intervention nothing would have transpired. It was they who entered into negotiations with the councillors, with the town clerk and with the police. They also all believed that the desperate action of stripping naked had not achieved its objective. In their view the objective was limited to shaming and chasing away the police. The women’s story was different.

### **The women’s stories**

The perspective of the homeless women themselves offers a very different version and set of priorities in relation to the problems and struggles that motivated the strategies and actions of people on the ground. The overriding concern of all the women involved was to have a place of their own, where they would have security of tenure and no longer face a precarious existence as sub-tenants, subject to the will of landlords. Without a secure and permanent home, all the women spoke of the difficulties of sustaining jobs and of maintaining their families intact. Shelter was seen as the basis for life itself.

The interpersonal dynamics of how the women came together straddles questions about the gendered nature of civil status. Individually, women had heard about the support which Lekgetho and the SCA gave to people through Operation Masekane. Often this arose from chance encounters with members of the civic. Each person came with her own desperate history of homelessness, of living tenuously for years in backyard slums, subject to exploitative landlords. In 1990, conditions were conducive to a more organised and strategic campaign around homelessness. Meetings of the homeless people were hosted by the Dobsonville Civic and although civic members were present, it certainly appears from our collective evidence that it was the homeless women themselves, in particular Maria Thiko, who decided on the strategy of invading open land and putting up shacks. Another woman, Nthabiseng Hlongwane, at the meeting the night before the authorities were due to dismantle the shacks, came up with the idea of stripping. She drew on ideas and discussions she had heard from her grandmother (Hlongwane interview). The tradition of African women using nakedness as a signal of anger and as a means of cursing perpetrators for unacceptable behaviour has a long history. It is hard to imagine men using their bodies in a similar act of protest and I can think of no masculine example. Certainly there are historical examples of men going to war naked and one could equally subject this to a gendered analysis, as a statement about the nature of militarised masculinity and virility. In the women's naked protest, the gendered construction of subjectivity and its relationship to rights comes across in what they said as much as in what they did. The women chanted, 'We also have the "thing" that other women give you! You can come and fuck me now!' in a little veiled allusion to the bribery of officials, who they accused of demanding sex and money for houses. Any rights they might have had were mediated by their womanhood and sexuality. Women's access to state-provided resources, such as housing and welfare, was tied to their status as wives or mothers.

Maria Thiko, who first mooted the idea of building shacks on the open veld in Dobsonville at a civic meeting, had spent years moving from one site to another in Soweto. After an abusive and violent marriage, she had obtained a divorce. In the process she lost her home and all her belongings. As a single parent with two children, her life was dominated by the needs of her family. Without education, her jobs were always in poorly paid domestic service. She managed, nevertheless, to buy a tin shack, which was rather like a mobile home because she moved it from one backyard to another. However, she was constantly on the lookout for a permanent home and had put her name down on the Dobsonville council housing list from as early as 1979. She haunted the council offices whenever there were rumours of houses or hostel accommodation being made available. She made sure that the councillors got to know her. She described how the mayor constantly made promises to her about housing, and made appointments with her at times when he was unavailable. She would wait for hours at the offices and often arrive late for work as a result. Her employers became frustrated with her, accusing her of holding down two jobs. Eventually they stopped believing that she was looking for a

home. After weeks of being late, waiting for hours for councillors' promises to materialise, Maria was sacked. Without a job, with school fees to pay and children to feed and clothe, she was in desperate straits. But her resourcefulness in the face of the need to survive was boundless. She found a job in a shop which kept her financially afloat.

She joined the Sofasonke Party in Mshenguville, the party which dominated the council, in the hope that this would provide access to shelter. After two meetings, Maria was elected as an organiser. But when all the party offered was a place at the distant Orange Farm settlement, she turned her attention to Dobsonville, where it was rumoured that land would be released for settlement. She explained: 'Sofasonke was launched in Dobsonville. I became active, anticipating that a place to stay would come up soon' (Thiko interview). The councillors again made promises to provide basic services on open land. Months went by, but nothing happened. Homeless people had given considerable amounts of money to one councillor in particular, to secure building sites. Maria parted with all her savings of R564 for the deposit. But she became suspicious when nothing came of the councillor's promises and demanded her money back. She had to wait for a month before it was returned to her, during which time she was made redundant from her job. She set off to find work in Roodepoort and there she met Charlie, a member of OMHLE and the Dobsonville Civic, to whom she explained her problems. He suggested that she come to the offices at the environmental centre, where plans were discussed. That evening, her landlady gave her notice. 'I said to myself, if the civic does not take any action I will take my shack – even if I put it in front of the office – because in reality now I no longer have a place to stay' (Thiko interview).

That was how she found herself at 'Lekgetho's place' (NEAC) at the end of June 1990. In her view, there was no longer an alternative to land invasion. Others at the meeting were in similar circumstances. All were determined that they had come to the end of their life as sub-tenants.

On Monday we had a meeting and we stressed that we should take our shacks to any open space. They asked which open space did we want and we said 'the one between Extension two and old Dobsonville'. We asked the executive to be at hand because the white language (*isikungu*) would be needed and we did not know it because the country belonged to the whites – they had taken it... (Thiko interview)

The shacks went up on 25 June. On the same day Maria went to collect her belongings, only to return to the area to find 'my shack flying in the air because they [the police] were removing them'. She rushed up to her shack, 'I was crying now, saying: "Oh, my Lord, when will we ever get a place to stay." ' Members of the civic interceded at this point with the town council and the town clerk, Tony Roux, to try to halt the demolition. Maria remembered that when they left she was standing on her zinc roofing and Roux laughed derisorily at her. 'I said to him "You laugh because you're better off. You have the whole world at your feet. You make a laughing stock of me, who does not

have any world" ' (Thiko interview). But she and the other women were determined to create their own world. This was but the first in a series of three such actions. The women simply rebuilt their shacks each time. The final action occurred on 12 July. This was when the women stripped off their clothes.

Nthabiseng Hlongwane was born in the townships but, like many children, was sent to the countryside to be brought up by her grandmother. In Witsieshoek, or Qwa Qwa as it came to be called, she lived in a mud hut in straitened circumstances. A few chickens, a vegetable plot and her grandmother's meagre old-age pension kept them alive. But as a 'borner', she had Section 10 urban rights and came to the city as a young woman to seek work. As with many women, her education was minimal and she had learned no more than the three Rs. She had met and married a man in her early twenties and rapidly bore three children, but the marriage was abusive. Her vision for her children was for a different and better life, so she left her husband. She found employment in a bakery, where she learned the fine art of icing cakes. Like many women, once she was without a husband she lost her home and was forced into squatter tenancy in the backyards of exploitative landlords. Like many lonely women, she sought a partner in life, to provide her with love and financial support. But she often spoke of the difficulty of establishing a meaningful and sustained relationship in the turbulence of township life. She was particularly concerned for the well-being and safety of her children. She also wanted a better life for herself.

Nthabiseng recounted how she became politically involved during the late 1980s. By chance she was walking along a road in Roodepoort and saw a piece of paper with the ANC colours on it. She picked it up. Not long afterwards she was stopped by a policeman, who searched her and came across the pamphlet. He hauled her off to detention. There she met another woman, who was well connected with the liberation movement. Through her, she met 'Ma' Albertina Sisulu, who arranged for political education classes. She then became a political activist and interacted with community leaders in her own area. She saw salvation for her own life and that of her children in the kind of future envisioned in the Freedom Charter. It was this vision that drove her desire to struggle against the corruption of the local community council.

Meanwhile, she had met a good man who lived with her during the period of the late 1980s. However, during the township struggles against rents and lack of services, her boyfriend disappeared. She was afraid and recounted to us her agonising search for him. She visited prisons in the neighbourhood, she visited local mortuaries, all to no avail. Then she heard that when bodies were unidentified, they were put on special 'funeral trains' and taken around the country for rural families to identify. She followed one of the trains and found her partner. She then took him back to his family in the Transkei. The loss of her partner was a disaster for the family, because he was the breadwinner. Meanwhile, like others, she had put her name on the Dobsonville area housing list. She described the frequency with which officials offered her a house if she 'would love them'. This she refused. She joined up with Japhta Lekgetho and OMHLE and this was

how she ended up in the same meetings with Maria Thiko. Between them, they provided leadership for the many women at the meetings. She spoke of how they asked the men to provide moral support for their land invasion. But she was clear that they had asked the men to keep out of the action. Their belief was that men tended to be violent and thus reverse any possible gains that might be made.

Nthabiseng was a leading figure in the July event. She bravely stood naked in front of the bulldozers as they moved towards the shacks. She and more than 40 other women danced and shouted, ‘We want houses.’ They knew that their shacks would be razed and that they would probably lose their belongings. However, the bulldozer was forced to pause because the naked protest forced negotiations for a reprieve. But the police were adamant that they had orders to remove the shacks. Not even the presence and negotiating skills of Sam Shilowa – one of the SCA leaders at the time, a consummate trade unionist and a decade later to become the premier of Gauteng – altered the situation. The women’s belongings were confiscated and despite many efforts by the Johannesburg Legal Resources Centre to reclaim their goods, they disappeared. No compensation was ever paid to the women for their losses. When the women regrouped that evening, a few of the more militant women, led by Nthabiseng, were arrested. This was part of the women’s strategy. It forced the authorities to interact with the women. Following this sustained series of actions the TPA released land adjacent to Dobsonville, in Doornkop, for the establishment of a site-and-service settlement. The women had won.

The above series of narratives shows how gender shaped the perspectives, the discourse and the needs and interests of different actors during the events of July 1990. For the women, their action was a last desperate act where they staked all they possessed on getting the authorities to notice them and their homeless plight. Their narrative was particularly poignant and brought into sharp focus the experience of women under apartheid’s urban policies. It also suggests that women established networks on the basis of circumstantial need. These were easily formed, but equally easily demobilised. The collective protest action brought a group of women, who had previously not known one another, together. It grew out of a shared need for access to land on which to establish their homes. Their desperation, vulnerability and anger as women were expressed in the form of the protest. Stripping naked was not an easy option and demonstrated how their circumstances had driven them into ‘madness’. It was a last resort. Although men were involved behind the scenes, offering support and their negotiating skills, the women had collectively asked them to keep a low profile.

For more than a month this particular cohort of women developed a close network in order to devise their invasion and squatter strategy, and together they faced police harassment and arrest. For three months after the event, they continued to harass the council and demand houses. Interestingly, during this period Thiko joined the ANC. Hers was a pragmatic assessment of which political force would best meet her needs and interests. In 1990 and 1991, she looked ahead to those she reckoned would be able to provide access to the newly released site-and-service scheme of Doornkop. This is

where she and the others who had participated in the protest were at last allocated sites.

When our research team met the women in 1991–92, they were settled on their plots. Without exception, the women felt they had won their place through their struggles, with the support of the civic. In Doornkop, their network continued to operate through 1992 as they established themselves. But the pressing need for collective action had dissipated and the women retreated into fending for their families. However, at moments when issues of collective significance arose, as in the arrest of members of the civic when they set up an embryonic self-defence unit in 1992, it was the women's networks which were activated within an hour to protest the arrest. The mobilisation of women appears to be deeply embedded in their immediate social networks, and is the key to an understanding of the manner in which their politicisation occurs.

## The intersection of local and national demands: the WNC

In the Doornkop naked protest, grassroots women acted on their own behalf. Their interpretation of success was different from men's. They believed that their actions had won the land for the community. Many joined the ANC and the ANC Women's League (ANCWL). Through the representation of these two organisations, women in Doornkop believed that their interests would be served. The ANCWL was a central player in the WNC, and this connection brought the women of Doornkop and other communities into the national political arena. The WNC in the period of negotiations was crucial in asserting and bringing into the national debate the idea of distinctive women's interests and the need to include 'gender' matters in the debates. More than this, though, the WNC asserted claims to substantive gender rights that defined gender equality as against formal equality rights.

In 1993, for instance, there appeared a moment when gender equality for women subject to customary law might be compromised, even by the ANC, as traditional leaders asserted their right to continue to govern by hereditary right and to trump the new Constitution in the making. The WNC intervened to mobilise a broad constituency of women activists and confronted the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa, the ANC aligned organisation of chiefs, in public debate. Famously, Nomboniso Gasa challenged Chief Nonkonyana in a television debate, calling the patriarchal bluff of so-called progressive chiefs in a debate about their power and authority in customary law, particularly over women. The outcome of the intervention ensured that gender equality was included in the political discussions about equality and a Bill of Rights. The definition of substantive equality that emerged out of the negotiations thus embraced the idea of gender equality that was the focus of the WNC's political and media campaigns during the negotiations for an interim Constitution.

The transition to democracy presented women's political organisations with particular challenges which forced them to address the question of commonality around

the ‘woman question’. The ANCWL and the ANC Emancipation Commission had led the process of bringing a ‘woman’s perspective’ to the negotiations about South Africa’s future. It drove the agenda of the WNC. The launch of the WNC in April 1992, after widespread consultations and preparations, was a historic moment – it saw women from different class backgrounds, race groups, political parties, from different kinds of women’s organisations, including the church, welfare and the health sectors, rub shoulders with one another. They found much to agree upon in the search for common experiences. But their commonalities were based upon a recognition of the diversity of culture, race and class – this constituted the strength and achievement of the WNC. It moved away from the essentialism that had dogged feminist initiatives elsewhere in the world (Cock 1997; Hassim 2002; Meintjes 1998).

On 27 September 1991 the first of a great number of conferences, workshops, seminars and consultations was held with 30 women’s organisations to discuss the aim of drawing up a Women’s Charter of equality. At this meeting the delegates found common interests and concerns on a number of key areas. They agreed on the fact of gender oppression and that in diverse ways it affected all women in South Africa. They agreed, too, that fundamental change had not only to eliminate racism, but sexism too. Frene Ginwala’s opening address pinpointed the objectives of the WNC: ‘Women will have to make sure that the constitution goes beyond a ritualistic commitment to equality and actually lays the basis for effective gender equality’ (Ginwala 1992).

## Women’s interests in the first ten years of democracy

The effect of the WNC’s charter campaign had dramatically altered the visibility of women during its height between June 1993 and February 1994. The campaign transformed the profile and discourse around women and gender relations. It gave substance to the shadowy notion of ‘non-sexism’ and asserted the importance of women’s particular disabilities in the debate about human rights in South Africa. It provided a template through the Women’s Charter for Effective Equality for changes to policy and the law. It provided a strong cohort of women political leaders from different parties who went into Parliament after the first democratic elections with a specific ‘woman’s agenda’. The champions of this process ensured the development of a woman-friendly state.

In Parliament, a critical mass of women Members of Parliament (MPs) had been nominated to the electoral lists of all parties – not through any formal quota system, but through the lobbying of committed women members. A Joint Monitoring Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of women (shortened here to Joint Monitoring Committee or JMC) was set up, initially ad hoc and without a budget, but later institutionalised through the championship of Pregs Govender in particular, who had been the manager of the WNC. During the next few years, Parliament legislated on reproductive rights, outlawed rape in marriage, offered protection from domestic violence for women,

illegalised discrimination against women, regularised the status of customary marriage and attempted to ensure that the maintenance system was improved. These changes signalled the success of women's campaigns for their rights, even in the private sphere. The WNC campaign had engaged the whole of South African society in questioning its norms about women's status and women's citizenship.

An Office on the Status of Women (OSW) was set up towards the end of 1996 in the office of the Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki. After the 1999 elections, the office moved with him to the Presidency. The OSW was mandated by Cabinet to establish mechanisms to promote gender equity in government and to define national gender policy for the state. However, the office was slow to develop this policy so that by the time it was finally completed, the legitimacy of the structure had been questioned, both by national departments and by civil society. The effectiveness of the OSW was hampered by the lack of a proper authoritative role throughout the state. Although mandated to develop national gender policy and monitor its implementation in government departments, the OSW essentially played a consultative role without any line function or authoritative relationship with government departments. It had no role in appointing gender focal points inside national departments or at provincial level. Thus its influence depended upon the finesse of its officials. In practice, the OSW initially took a defensive position and struggled to establish an effective modus operandi, nor did it establish partnerships with civil society, the JMC or the new Commission on Gender Equality (CGE).

The CGE was the third institution to be set up, this time in terms of the Constitution itself. During the dying hours of the final negotiations in 1994, a Commission on Gender Equality was provided for under Chapter 9 of the Constitution, to be one among six independent statutory bodies to promote and protect democracy. Act 39 of 1996 established the CGE to promote and protect gender equality, and provided it with considerable powers to undertake public education, take complaints and investigate, acquire information, propose policy and even initiate legislation in the course of its work. In the first months of its existence the CGE engaged in a process of widespread consultation with women's organisations and government departments in order to find a role for itself. At the provincial level, the CGE set up satellite offices, usually headed by a national commissioner. Dogged at first by insufficient funds to fulfil its mandate, subsequent problems arose in relations between commissioners and the staff, which threatened to implode the organisation not two years after it was established. Part of the reason was to do with a conflict between a commitment to promoting gender equality and a political commitment to political parties. Purportedly independent, the process of appointment of commissioners in fact invited political accountability – the fact that commissioners were interviewed not by a panel of independent experts but by an ad hoc Committee of Parliament, meant that MPs, and especially ANC MPs, were able to choose their preferred nominees. Whilst in the law the Act stipulated that the commission was to act 'without fear or favour', in reality the CGE curtailed its own sphere of action to deal with symptoms rather than causes of gender equality in state

and society. It identified poor rural women as the litmus test of progress – a focus that tended to eschew challenges to the broader androcentric, or male-defined, nature of power in society, and to focus on development strategies that were palliative rather than structural. Its interpretation of its role was limited to public education rather than to significant challenges arising from a deep gender analysis of the macroeconomic and political environment (Meintjes 2005; Seidman 2003).

Would the gains made in the early 1990s for a woman-friendly constitutional dispensation that spoke of substantive gender equality and spelled out the object of ‘non-sexism’ be confined to mere discursive (reasoned and argued) features of citizenship, rather than becoming real, substantive gains? The real struggles for gender equality resided not in the discursive terrain, but rather in the everyday struggles of women’s lived reality, where paper rights would only have meaning if they met the real needs of people’s lives. The transition to democracy was the first step in a much longer road, where society remained substantially male dominated, and where the holders of real power in political affairs were men. The transition to democracy provided the setting for women across divides of race, class and culture to come together to seek the commonalities of their subordination under patriarchy. The real test would come in the period when democracy was put into practice.

While the WNC withered away, other issues had come to the fore around which women organised. Activists engaged in combating violence against women found considerable support from women previously involved in the political struggle and who had acquired political office. In the transition, there were signs that women had become the target for the frustration of men whose lives did not change in the new South Africa. As women began to acquire more confidence and to play a more public role, so individual women appeared to come under physical attack in the form of sexual assault. Nthabiseng Hlongwane, for instance, found herself brutally attacked by her ex-husband in 1998 for refusing to reconsider living with him. He and three men pretended to visit her, abducted her, and took her to an abandoned mine, where they raped her for four days, and left her to die. She was fortunately discovered and taken to hospital. Her survival has left terrible scars. But this horrific story supports the hypothesis that politically engaged and confident women constitute a threat to the patriarchal controls of men in society. Lashing out violently against strong women is one means of trying to undermine any gains made for women in society.

Organisations that offered services to abused women and children formed a national network and collaborated with former activists now in Parliament and in government. The effects of institutionalising the issue of gender-based violence resulted in an annual nationwide campaign – the Sixteen Days of No Violence Against Women. This brought civil society and the state, which included the departments of Justice and Constitutional Development, Correctional Services and also Population Development and Welfare, into a significant collaborative relationship. Indeed, the new Domestic Violence Act passed in 1998 was very much the creature of civil society (Albertyn et al. 1999). However,

gender-based violence did not die down significantly. Indeed, the laws to deal with sexual offences exist in the breach – while there was certainly more publicity about gender violence, evidence suggests increasing levels of violence, and that perpetrators and victims are getting younger and younger. Clearly the strategies adopted through policy and legislation did not get to the heart of the gender problems and were ineffective. Much more research needs to be done into why intimate family violence is so pervasive. The focus of research has, in the new millennium, begun to probe the constructions of masculinity and gender roles in society. Whether this will lead to a deeper understanding of how gender power is constructed and what changing roles will mean remains an open question. However, the institutionalising of the ‘gender-based violence sector’ tended to depoliticise the activism of civil society in the period immediately after the first democratic elections, as others have shown elsewhere (Meer 1999). Instead, action research tended to focus on the modalities of the violence rather than on the deeper structural reasons related to gender power in society.

The representation of women at the more formal level in Parliament reached what scholars elsewhere have termed a ‘critical mass’ early in the new democratic dispensation. It was at this level that the presence of women made a significant impact on legislation favouring women’s needs and in national policy (Albertyn et al. 1998; Fick et al. 2002). The research shows that the difference may have altered perceptions about women’s political capacities, but it has not led to substantive changes in the overall status of women. Men still dominate decision-making in all areas of public life. In private life, gender-based violence remains endemic. The fact that gender remains the defining difference in the life chances of women and men means that we have not been able to transcend the sexual contract first suggested by Carol Pateman – citizenship is not neutral and continues to create differentiated citizens with different rights and entitlements depending on their sex (Pateman 1989).

Critical questions for political activists involved in anti-apartheid community struggles throughout South Africa in the early 1990s included how the popular demands for land, housing and other social needs reflected in the Freedom Charter were to be translated into constitutional rights. The immediate living conditions of people shaped their subjective needs and immediate political demands. The gender politics of the struggle had itself defined how women conceived of their civic role. Women’s earlier organisational struggles had challenged the idea that women were mere appendages to support men in their political work. Women in opposition, at least, whether in the United Democratic Front or in the exile movements, saw themselves as equal actors. The separate organisation of women was an indicator that women believed that the only way that they could articulate their needs and interests was in mobilising as women, but at the same time joining broader political parties and political movements (Hassim 2002; Kemp et al. 1995). In the 1990s, when it seemed that women might be excluded from participating in the constitutional talks, the ANCWL brought together the broad coalition that became the WNC to define the specific demands of women in the country.

The agenda of both local and national sexual politics took the form of demands for rights that took account of the gender differences between women and men.

The narrative of the women's naked protest linked the symbolism of their action – they stripped naked – to a sexualised social contract that both reflected and challenged their position. Their action showed both the agency of women at grassroots, their instinctive and strategic understanding of their position in society, and how they used this to recast their rights and to make claims for the state's responsibilities and duties towards them. Their claims were about practical needs embedded in a particular set of gendered relationships of power. Strategically, they mobilised their vulnerability as a political tool – using their cultural and social capital of sexuality to make claims on the state. Subsequent events have shown that the gains that were made, both in terms of legislation and of decision-making, have not easily translated into improvements in women's lives. A new kind of battleground opened up around gender power, gender roles and the status of women. In the early twenty-first century we are made more aware than ever of the need to confront gender transformation in ways that will not see the continued brutalisation of women by men who are unable to deal with the idea of gender equality.

## NOTES

- 1 This chapter draws on both published and unpublished research that I have undertaken over the last 15 years. The argument I present in this chapter constitutes a fresh interpretation and use of some of that material. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my research assistants, Belede Mazwai, Esme Magwaza, Letabo Maleka and Lulu Sibeko in undertaking the interviews. The transcriptions and translations were undertaken by Nontobeko Luggola, Esme Magwaza, and Lulu Sibeko. This chapter is written in loving memory of Belede Mazwai, who died in 1992, and Sheila Hlongwane, who died in 2005.
- 2 We interviewed about a third of the participants in the protest. All the interviews were conducted one-on-one in the vernacular. I was present at virtually all of the interviews which were conducted by my research assistants (Belede Mazwai, Esme Magwaza, Letabo Maleka and Lulu Sibeko). I followed the discussion with difficulty, but was able to interject questions. My role was to observe reactions and to note body language. Together with translated transcripts, these form the basis of the women's narratives.

## REFERENCES

- Albertyn C (1994) Women and the transition to democracy in South Africa. In C Murray (ed) *Gender and the new South African legal order*. Johannesburg: Juta.
- Albertyn C, Goldblatt B, Hassim S, Mbatha L & Meintjes S (1999) *Engendering the political agenda: A South African case study*. Johannesburg: Centre for Applied Legal Studies.
- Albertyn C, Hassim S & Meintjes S (1998) Women's participation in electoral processes: South Africa in global perspective. Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, Conference on the Electoral System, Cape Town.
- Ardener S (1973) Sexual insult and female militancy. *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8: 422–440.
- Bernstein A (1989) South Africa's cities – crisis management or courageous leadership. In R Schrire (ed) *Critical choices for South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Cock J (1997) Women in South Africa's transition to democracy. In J Scott, C Kaplan & D Keates (Eds) *Transitions, environments, translations: Feminism in international politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Fick G, Meintjes S & Simons M (Eds) (2002) *One woman, one vote: The gender politics of South African elections*. Johannesburg: Electoral Institute of South Africa.

- Ginwala F (1992) Speech to the Convening Conference of the Women's National Coalition, Johannesburg.
- Grest J (1988) The crisis of local government in South Africa. In P Frankel, N Pines & M Swilling (Eds) *State, resistance and change in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers.
- Hassim S (2002) 'A conspiracy of women': The women's movement in South Africa's transition to democracy. *Social Research*, 69: 693–732.
- Kaplan T (1997) *Crazy for democracy: Women in grassroots movements*. New York: Routledge.
- Kemp A, Madlala N, Moodley A & Salo E (1995) The dawn of a new day: Redefining South African feminisms. In A Basu (ed) *The challenge to local feminisms: Women's movements in comparative perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Meer S (1999) The demobilisation of civil society: Struggling with new questions. *Development Update*, 3(1): 13–21.
- Meintjes S (1998) Gender, nationalism and transformation: Difference and commonality in South Africa's past and present. In R Wilford & RL Miller (Eds) *Women, ethnicity and nationalism: The politics of transition*. London: Routledge.
- Meintjes S (2005) Gender equality by design: The case of the South African Commission on Gender Equality. *Politikon*, 2(2): 259–275.
- Pateman C (1989) *The sexual contract*. London: Routledge.
- Seekings J (1988) Political mobilization in the black townships of the Transvaal. In P Frankel, N Pines & M Swilling (Eds) *State, resistance and change in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers.
- Seidman G (2003) Feminist interventions: The South African Gender Commission and 'strategic' challenges to gender inequality. *Feminist Studies*, 29(3): 541–563.

### QUOTED INTERVIEWS

- Banda Benson, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Hlongwane Nthabiseng, Doornkop 1992–93 and 2003–05.
- Lekgetho Japhta, Dobsonville, January 1992.
- Thiko Maria, Doornkop, 1992–93.

### UNQUOTED INTERVIEWS

- Khanyile Meisie, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Lekekela Anna, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Mabuza Herbert, Johannesburg, December 1991.
- Magazi Tiny, Doornkop, February 1992.
- Mbadla Bangiwe, Doornkop, September 1993.
- Mbatha Sabelo William, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Moathludi Francina, Doornkop, February 1992.
- Mokgosi Rose, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Mosiani Obed, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Mtolo Frans, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Nikani Rosey, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Penethi Cecilia, Doornkop, January 1992.
- Sithole Rose Dube, Doornkop, January 1992.

### ARCHIVAL SOURCES

- Malibongwe conference papers, Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Author's personal papers, Women's National Coalition.

# 'Loving in a time of hopelessness' On township women's subjectivities in a time of HIV/AIDS

NTHABISENG MOTSEMME

In many explanations for the failure to effectively fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic, culture has been cited as one of the most challenging barriers to confront (Brummelhuis & Herdt 1995). In conversational interviews conducted with young women, I have found the socio-cultural milieu in which they are remaking themselves and their futures – redefining what constitutes risky and normative intimacy, and what remains joyous about relationships, sex and love in the age of HIV/AIDS – to be highly contradictory and complex. It is for these reasons that I argue that we need to redirect some of our studies at this point. First, the meanings of HIV/AIDS messages germinate their relevance and thus acceptable forms of authority within specific socio-cultural contexts. If preventative messages are to acquire grounded meaning, it becomes crucial to understand this complex fabric of everyday life – which we may be blind to – within which youth operate and formulate and at times even ‘rework’ cultural artefacts and practices. It is only when we are able to find both epistemological as well as empirical frameworks and tools that capture youth at their specific social locales where conversations and decisions about their sexual lives are being formulated, that most of ‘what actually happens’ can then be incorporated into HIV/AIDS strategies that target young women. There are other broader reasons though. As Bakare-Yusuf (2003) notes, it is when we begin to also view African women’s sexuality as not wholly linked to reproductive health or disease that we simultaneously open up room to focus at a deeper level on the pleasures and joys that are the precursor and precondition of sexual danger. This allows us to then investigate some fundamental aspects of human interactions, and the ways cultural artefacts and other methods are used by young women in urban ghettos to fashion viable identities in the midst of social chaos. In other words, we begin to get a better sense of how meanings are generated in times of social and ethical breakdown.

During conversations with young women, it soon became clear that I would receive stock responses and thus little information if I focused my attention squarely on the subject

of HIV/AIDS. Perhaps it is worth outlining at the onset that KwaZulu-Natal province, where this research was based, is considered to be the worst-hit province by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. It has quickly acquired the status of illustrating the ‘worst-case scenario’. Further, the township in which my research is based, Chesterville, though statistically not verified, has acquired the symbolic status of being one of the urban sites that harbours HIV/AIDS. Part of the reason is that it is one of the smaller and poorer townships in KwaZulu-Natal. The popular but silent sentiment emerging has even infiltrated individuals’ bodies: to come from there is to be a dangerous, polluted person who is a potential carrier. Such sentiments act to reinforce popular notions which tend to fuse poverty with women, and then link them to symbolic and physical pollution. All these circulating discourses, often operating beneath official general health rhetoric, have also had the effect of making those coming from such places hyper-vigilant and self-conscious about anything that may link them to this ‘death-promising disease’. All of this does not mean that individuals do not readily speak about HIV/AIDS in their everyday lives, but they do so in veiled and masked forms.

To show how these young women of Chesterville township navigate and talk about their social lives in a time of social fragmentation (and reconfiguration), I have structured the chapter in the following manner: I begin by outlining some *limitations of prevailing HIV/AIDS approaches*, advocating the urgent need for more socio-culturally grounded approaches which also consider important historical shifts and continuities that affect young women’s lives.

I then explore *narrations of violence* as shared by them and show how the historical violences in which these young women’s subjectivities are imbedded, have been repeatedly defined by the targeted destruction of their socio-cultural resources, which ensure cultural and self-continuity, as well as notions of felt safety. When safe space is experienced as a wound, it becomes necessary to question the effects on young women’s subjectivities.

The *intergenerational struggles* that continue to shape relationships between young people and adults, and especially between these young women and their mothers, are also briefly examined. The breakdown of parental authority, which several parents express, also shows how social relationships within township homes continue to be highly stressed and yet also become the site for possible recovery.

I then move to looking at the ways young women are experiencing and *conceptualising their structural constraints, when they talk about the difficulties and frustrations of ‘sitting around’*. They show us how the challenge of unemployment, specifically in urban townships, remains a problem that marks this young democracy.

The section on *repeated experiences of death, funerals and HIV/AIDS* suggests how death continues to structure everyday life in most townships. In the 1980s it was political deaths; now it is ‘bad’ HIV/AIDS deaths.

Finally, the chapter explores young women’s *strategies of ‘survival’ as rooted in the philosophy and practice of ‘ukuphanta’*, which has close links with their ways of maintaining a viable identity amidst social chaos. The interconnections between violence,

survival, sex, loss and intimacy all point to how material/socio-economic lack and deepening social inequalities continue to shape the increasing commodification of love and desire.

And of course it would be impossible to escape the fact of the location of these young women, whose sexual practices take place within a context which is often perceived as 'hopeless'; 'the place which has no life', as they repeatedly refer to their township home. They belong to a class of women in South Africa who continue to live in the four-roomed and two-roomed Reconstruction and Development Programme houses and shanty towns bursting at the seams of KwaZulu-Natal's townships, and who express feelings of being left behind by the wagon of democracy and the glitzy developments taking place in the new South Africa.

## **Some limitations of prevailing HIV/AIDS approaches**

### **Much of HIV/AIDS research relies on hegemonic notions of rational human behaviour**

Many social studies conducted on HIV/AIDS have tended to reinforce the idea that sex and therefore AIDS reflect some forms of irrationality. This is evident in studies that focus exclusively on specific high-risk behaviours, high-risk groups (interestingly, it is often those who occupy the margins of society – homosexuals, prostitutes, Blacks), and personality variables such as low self-esteem, low internal locus of control and so on. While knowledge of these issues is important, most of these studies have failed to explain why transmissions continue despite the absence of some of these factors. Ralph Bolton, delivering the opening speech at a conference on 'Culture, Sexual behaviour and AIDS', argued that probably the biggest reason for unsafe sex is love, which involves risk taking, giving and trusting, and yet we have done little research on this area. He goes on to say that we may even find that prostitutes are more likely to become infected from lovers than from their clients. Certainly, even despite strong HIV/AIDS messages and high levels of publicised infection rates in South Africa, unprotected sex remains the norm.

Let us centre the continent and look at, for example, the ways we have for generations and generations been engulfed by colonialism, wars, ethnic conflicts and racial hatred. The question then arises: can we really even begin to understand the question of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS when, for example, figures on war in northern Uganda show that in some of the districts more than half of the women have been raped and suffer serious gynaecological problems; others have been brutally attacked and tortured, and many are depressed, experience regular nightmares and have constant anxiety attacks (ISIS-WICCE 2001)? And what of the constant population displacements caused by civil wars and/or corrupt governments, which have left many without a safe refuge

and open to all kinds of socio-economic vulnerabilities, including sexual violence and coercion? And what about right here at home, where extreme forms of political repression and violence, repeated experiences of targeted deaths in communities and living daily with risk came to be experienced as the norm in everyday life? Surely within these violent forms of everyday life we must revisit what it is we mean by ‘safety’, ‘risky’ and ‘choosing life’. In these often unaccounted for histories of oppression, where local meanings and order have been violently devastated and, in some cases, completely erased, surely so-called risky behaviour cannot be conceptualised as anti-rational when everything meaningful in one’s life disappears? Surely this requires other modes of interpretation of sexual practices, risk, intimacy and desire?

The point is that uncertainty, collapse and transformations of family systems, as well as loss of the meanings of one’s life generated by events such as wars, racism, poverty and other forms of chronic violence, cannot be seen as outside our understanding of why HIV/AIDS is such a problem in Africa and, in addition, how it is that individuals and communities tame, domesticate and learn to live with it.

### **Approaches tend to be individualistic**

The search for individual deficiencies in those engaged in unsafe sex, particularly those deficiencies described in personality theories, has been argued as a way of reducing the problems of HIV/AIDS to individual actors. Richard Parker (1995) argues that this factor in research tends to emphasise individual determinants of sexual behaviour and change, and ignores the diverse social, cultural, economic and political factors potentially influencing or shaping sexual experience.

### **Studies are based on methods such as surveys and focus groups**

The dominant use of survey research methods, while it fits well with research agendas defined in terms of epidemiological concerns or psychological models of behaviour change, are inadequate for providing a multidimensional insight into sexual accounts and the experience of suffering (Parker 1995).

There also appears to be a growing consensus that the academic aloofness which has characterised some HIV/AIDS research projects must be replaced by not only more sensitive methodologies, but also identification with the people we are studying. It is an ethical call for the need to go beyond witnessing, recording and dispassionate analysis, and to actively incorporate outrage and compassion in our work with communities. *Emotions* then become central to our work, and perhaps this must also affect the languages we consciously use in our research. By taking this position and approach we may even invent new languages of pain, suffering and recovery (see Das 1996). And as I came to learn, this becomes particularly important when the researcher is a part of this ailing community, and is directly affected by the constant deaths occurring in her or his own family as well as those of neighbours.

## Theories tend to be anti-pleasure

We cannot ignore that part of sexuality is also about the search for pleasure, to abandon and surrender yourself to another. This basic human emotion cannot be ignored simply because we are faced with a ‘dangerous’ epidemic. The search for pleasure continues despite this, and the more challenging question becomes: What is it like to try to love in a time of hopelessness? Putting such reflections on the table may be particularly difficult, especially when entire communities are being wiped out by HIV/AIDS as we have witnessed in our own communities. Michelle Fine (1988) makes the observation that neglecting the pleasures of intimacy keeps us entrapped in current discourses of female sexuality which include *sexuality as violence* and *sexuality as victimisation*. These, she argues, have simply failed to provide rich discussions on danger and desire in sexual practice, rendering young women’s subjectivities as without sexual agency.

## Feminisation and racialisation of AIDS

‘It is clear that this pandemic increasingly has a woman’s face,’ says Stephen Lewis, special envoy for the secretary general of the United Nations in Africa (Solheim 2002). What he forgot to add was that it has a young African woman’s face. As an African woman I enter this intellectual terrain very hesitantly because this HIV/AIDS discourse has become politically precarious, especially where race and class are concerned. We are all aware how the dominant discourses of disease and sexuality have traditionally portrayed the Black female body as the ‘essentialised vector of “evil” and “promiscuity”’ (McFadden 2004). To avoid academic repetition as a researcher it is imperative that you are conscious at all times of how you might be contributing to reinscribing women’s (especially young women’s) voices, bodies and sexualities in particular ways, and why.

## Narrations of violence: displacement, the home as target of political terror and the fragmentation of family structures

An aspect I had not anticipated to find as central to young women’s life histories was the extent to which most of their recollections began with an episode of displacement. This foundational episode of ‘uprootedness’ was often followed by repeated, sometimes forced, resettlements.

Uprootedness as a form of *physical and spiritual violence* is an aspect which surprisingly continues to receive scant attention in South African social studies. However, given that this issue was surfacing in narratives I decided to take a few steps back and rethink this concept of past violence committed against the Black body – its family structure as well as its socio-cultural networks. Probing the breakdown of the social fabric through experiences of displacement might also add to our knowledge regarding histories of violation that women continue to be embedded in. Perhaps this might also

make us more appreciative of why young women are imagining relationships with each other, their families as well as their sexual partners in particular ways.

Elaine Scarry, in her ground-breaking book *The Body in Pain* (1985), reminds us that violence is world-making and world-destroying. She also makes the important observation that the unmaking of civilisation inevitably requires a return to and mutilation of the domestic, what she calls the ground of all making (Scarry 1985). Several South African scholars have noted how apartheid violence targeted the family, or more specifically, African-centred cultural resources that shaped the maintenance, sustenance and continuity of communities. Central to apartheid violence, particularly the state terror of high apartheid in the 1980s, was the fragmentation of the local moral worlds of communities (Kleinman 1992). However, as mentioned, in many accounts of the violence of colonisation and apartheid in South Africa, these aspects of violence have been edited out.

An area which vividly illustrates this violent tearing of the social fabric is when domestic space and socio-cultural resources become objects of state terror. The effect of this is to infuse the domestic as well as the cultural with political codes and insignia (Feldman 1991). This attack on the home by apartheid forces and later vigilante groups in urban Black communities constituted for Pamela Reynolds (2000) a violation of the community's ability to nurture, form relations and therefore regenerate itself. This attack on homes, which surfaces in narrations, highlights the need to gain a fuller perspective on the lived effects of fundamental violations such as the right to a sanctuary. Questions on what kinds of subjectivities these young women are fashioning for themselves when sanctuary or safe space is experienced as a wound, remain largely unexplored. In the midst of repeated fracture, what is it that these young women hold onto? What do they let go of, in order to create viable identities to survive?

The history of political violence which made KwaZulu-Natal one of the most violent places to live in during the 1980s has been documented (see Bonnin 2000; Byarugaba nd; Gutteridge & Spence 1997; Nzimande Thusi 1991). This violence, often incorrectly portrayed as 'Black-on-Black' violence between the then banned ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), lasted almost two decades with its remnants still reverberating till today. It is important to point out that what surfaced in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) testimonies regarding political violence in KwaZulu-Natal was the careful orchestration of several violent events by the apartheid state in collusion with the IFP (Jeffery 1999). However, the extent to which aspects of this violence became normative and incorporated into individuals and family structures remains insufficiently probed. Further, the ways this specific generational violence continue to stressfully shape the continuity of family patterns and/or forms of interactions between communities remains a gap in South African social studies. What often tends to happen is that these effects are subsumed and normalised under the concept of 'township'. In the extract below, Thandi (a 24-year-old single mother) relates her life story, filled with violent episodes, where violence became a normalised backdrop incorporating what I suppose it meant/means to be a young woman growing up in KwaZulu-Natal.

THANDI: I am originally from Adams [originally a missionary settlement in the northern rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal]

INTERVIEWER: Oh...

THANDI: ...yes, it's a rural area...when we lived there it was an open area, there was no developments like now...we came to live there because my mother's brother...the thing is he was a policeman who was working in KwaMakhutha during the ANC-IFP wars...it was his house...we lived there...one day, I remember it was the funeral of Chris Hani.

INTERVIEWER: I remember that day...

THANDI: They came and burned all the houses around...you see we all lived together...there was my uncle's house then aunts and cousins houses together...all of them were burned...all houses of people they knew were IFP were burned...

INTERVIEWER: ...everything...Did you manage to save anything?

THANDI: Everything, everything was burned down...and some of the things they just took...they stole whatever it is they felt they wanted to steal...they burned everything and we left...we were then all relocated to the community hall in KwaMakhutha...and then I left to go and live in Umlazi at R section...There...well you see at that time I stopped going to school...we lived there for some time...There was a small yard you see and we built a small shack...But living in the shack was not good...After some time my mother talked to her sister because she thought it would be better if we lived in the house...In the house it was my mother's sister, her two daughters, and my mother and my sisters...We lived well at that time and then the following year I went back to school...and then there was a time when it was not good to stay there it became bad and then my sister started looking for a flat for us to live in town...Then we find a flat and stayed at the flat...then things didn't work out and we started looking for another place to live...now my mother lives at a back room at the white people where she works [as a domestic worker] and I live with my boyfriend's family...my sister is looking for shelter as she is having problems with the house she found after the flat...

Clearly, the violation and penetration of the police, vigilante groups and unidentified mobs into homes not only reminds us of how others lived daily with violence, but also how the state literally inscribed itself onto the most privatised senses of people. Or as Feldman (1991) notes of state power and violence in Northern Ireland's political violence, how the state takes control over the interiority of the body and imprints its power over material objects, bodies and built environments. Within this process, three

fundamental violations occurred. The first is a violation of the senses, which is set into motion as norms and codes that define the home as a place of protection are undermined and no longer carry the same meanings they used to embody. Safety, warmth, the smell of pap and oxtail soup are transformed by the chilling presence of the shadow of the betrayal of the forced intrusion. That is, a *violation of the senses* is what ultimately takes place. This forced entry of the state into homes is thus always felt and becomes a continuous embodied presence.

Secondly, not only is there a violation and transformation of the senses, but the walls of the home take on new *spatialised meanings*. A transformation in spatial meanings takes place when the walls of the iconic four-roomed township houses themselves are no longer just cement, bricks, etc., but also come to register a crumbling of boundaries between the outside and inside, public and private, interiority and exteriority (Feldman 1991). In this sense the wall can be said to store a history of violence (sometimes it is literally inscribed, for example through bullet holes). Common to these narratives of violence is then also the forced opening of the house to the outside, or allowing what Metha and Chatterji (2001) argue as 'the outside' becoming a permanent feature of the violated home.

Thirdly, as I have highlighted in other works where I explore women's testimonies at the TRC, these narrations also highlight the extent to which women felt powerless and unable to maintain their families (see Motsemme 2004; Ross 1997). They show the failure of what many women felt was the imperative duty of homes: to protect and contain their families. They surface the process in which a loss of control, a loss of lived meanings constituted around the home, and the pain this brought into families' lives, unfolded and was thus experienced as a deep violation for mothers. The fact that this violation was located in the domestic space, which usually marks a relatively ordered, continuous and predictable world (Ross 1997), provided a singular blow to women.

We must also add to these broader political upheavals and lived uprootedness, as Thandi reminds us, the accompaniment of personal dramas and feuds between family members. Unless resolved, these incidents also contribute to displacement experiences for young women and their families. Unmarried mothers with their children who reside in family homes are particularly vulnerable, as their right to shelter is usually precariously linked to the benevolence of parents (especially the father), or the older brother in the case where the parents have died.

Contained within many of these young women's life histories was the regular witnessing of killings, burnings of their homes and other violent crimes. Surely such experiences cannot be divorced from what continues to shape their meanings of what constitutes a 'good life' and a 'bad life'. It must also continue to impact on their choices of how they chose to confront their everyday experiences. In other words, *the past continued to have an ominous presence in their lives*. To some extent they live the present in historical terms (Mallki 1995). Within this context it becomes crucial to understand the *role of memory and violence in the constitution of these young women's*

*self-identity*. This is because the role of memory is, as we know, a strong factor in shaping and reconfiguring our identities. And in South Africa a major aspect of our memory is the history of actual and symbolic violence, which continues to have resonance to this day. For those who embody this experience, this is not just about official history symbolised in public political gestures or embodied in famous struggle icons. It is, rather, a history of violence which has been incorporated not only into the most private realm – their bodies and the intimate spaces of their interior lives – but also into their homes, interpersonal relationships and communities. These young women's recollections then allow us to witness the extent to which past personal and collective violence and trauma shape their attitudes to risk, death, survival, disease, desire and relationships.

## **Intergenerational struggles and the crisis of parental authority**

How do we begin to explain the crisis of parental authority that most parents feel particularly disempowered to transform? As part of understanding generational ruptures and continuities, I also interviewed some mothers and grandmothers in Chesterville township. One sentiment that they all shared was that children's authority was fast superseding parental authority. It is reasonable to suggest that part of the explanation for this breakdown in parental authority can be traced to our recent history of intergenerational betrayal, another topic which requires more historically grounded explorations (see Benedict Carton [2000] for a recent attempt to trace the historical breakdown of parental authority in African homes). During the 1970s a radical transformation, which was to be solidified during the 1980s' period of political unrest, occurred in township homes. Youth defied their parents' authority, particularly their fathers, who were seen as colluding with the apartheid state via passive acceptance. Tin argues that the position of the patriarch in townships has always been a tentative one, as 'he was split between demands made on him by his radical children and by the repressive state, and many children lost respect for what they saw as the pitiful survival strategies of their fathers; avoiding the hassle of the overcrowded house, drinking beer in some shebeen after work and leaving the family to its own devices' (2001: 14). Within these entrapments, possibilities for intergenerational conflicts were opened up. Therefore, in June 1976, youth not only rebelled in the township's streets, but also against patriarchy in its current form in their homes, causing a violent reconfiguration of power and authority structures within the family. However, the erosion of patriarchal power, particularly in urban families, was more a carefully managed myth, since both urban and rural women were increasingly running households. Mamphele Ramphelé puts this succinctly when she observes the ways African women 'tread a fine line between affirming the manhood of their men-folk and supporting themselves and their

children. The myth of the man as supporter, protector, provider and decision-maker were carefully nurtured in an attempt to protect the family and community from ethical breakdown' (2000: 115). Of course, this reorganisation of the family structure meant that women's role as nurturer was further extended to being principal provider and disciplinarian, which continues to heavily burden women.

It is interesting that mothers are quick to point out that the parental authority crisis can be directly attributed to the emerging *rights-based culture* introduced after apartheid. As a 92-year-old interviewee sceptically acknowledged, 'There is no more respect in our children. Those who have respectful children should go on their knees and be thankful as this is rare.' The idea of disciplining other children within the community, as encouraged in the concept of ubuntu, was seen as a thing of the fading past. Grandmothers and mothers complained that disciplining a child that was not from your immediate family was not worth it any longer, as you were likely to be met with responses such as, '*Ungubani?*' (Who are you?), '*Unani?*' (What do you have?), or '*Isikhathi sethu manje, asazilutho ngesenu!*' (It's our time now, we know nothing about yours!). Such responses signal the extent to which modes of existing in urban communities, such as ubuntu, are being continuously challenged within townships.

However, one of the mothers I spoke to did point out that the laws introduced under the new democracy were not altogether negative, as she had witnessed many cases of abusive parents in the township. She still maintained, though, that the majority of young women (as it tended to be them who used or rather manipulated these laws, she said) used them to disempower parents so they could live life as they wished. She then continued to cite examples of young girls she also knew who had dropped out of school and were shacking up with boyfriends at a very young age. Parents, they all seemed to agree, had lost power and the only thing to do was to 'watch'. And so we witness the social formation of 'watching parents' as opposed to 'intervening and disciplining parents'.

### **'Sihlezi for years': poverty, unemployment and 'sitting around'**

The majority of young women I interviewed came from households where most family members were unemployed, and hence the household relied in one way or another on government grants such as pensions and/or child support grants for economic survival. Further, these young women who themselves were unemployed (except for two, one a waitress and the other a seamstress) described themselves as 'sitting' (*sihlezi*). This notion of 'we are sitting' is a widespread one and I encountered it on several occasions. In other words, in everyday talk young people did not describe themselves as unemployed when I enquired about what they are currently doing, but rather as 'we are sitting'. They will also tell you that the phenomenon of 'sitting' is very widespread and a serious challenge for many urban youth in Black townships and that in fact many of

them have been ‘sitting around’ for years. While conducting this research, seeing me at home and carrying out the rituals of being at home, several people approached me to ask whether I was also ‘sitting’ this year. This ‘idling’ and ‘passing the day’ through everyday rituals doesn’t seem to be even remotely linked to the act of seeking employment. However, some are quick to point out that even though they are ‘sitting’, they do periodically go out and look for work. However, they just as quickly add how hopeless it is to try to find work in KwaZulu-Natal. The concept of ‘*ukuhlala*’ or ‘sitting’ or ‘idling’ therefore seems to contain within its meaning a sense of resignation about finding good employment.

However, although the idea of ‘*ukuhlala*’ is strongly linked to the incapacity to move (a symbolic sense of amputation) and a lack of creativity and stimulation in one’s social environment (‘the place with no life’), individuals are mobile, but it is within routinised socio-cultural parameters. For example, when I asked groups of young women to describe what a day of ‘sitting around’ involved, generally they would describe the following daily rhythms: the day began with doing household chores which included cleaning, hand washing clothes, and taking care of babies or smaller children who had not started attending school; bathing and getting dressed would follow around midday; after cleaning their houses and bodies, it was time to sit outside in their small yards waiting for friends to visit, or going visiting themselves where ‘catching up’ on the latest news and strategising around the weekend usually occurred; as the afternoon approached and others were coming home from work, this signalled the time to start preparing the evening meal; and finally, the evenings were reserved for watching favourite television dramas and visits from lovers.

The politics of labour in KwaZulu-Natal at this point in time are important to highlight. Young women who were ‘sitting around’ also pointed out that seeking work in KwaZulu-Natal was unlike other provinces, as the Indian and ‘coloured’ communities tended to continue to be privileged in employment practices. This, of course, forms part of the remnants of apartheid ideology which privileged opportunities for Indians and ‘coloureds’ over Africans to enter the informal and formal job markets. There was an overall feeling of injustice as youth expressed that the job market only offered jobs to Indians and ‘coloureds’, and very rarely to Africans, sentiments echoed in the controversial and now banned song ‘Amandiya’ by well-known playwright Mbongeni Ngema. One woman expressed her anger and betrayal, saying that she had not voted in the last general elections as she felt the ANC supported this status quo in order to secure Indian financial support and its votes in KwaZulu-Natal. If you were lucky to find ‘something’, some youth added, you had to put up with terrible treatment and bad pay. That is if they had not already hired a ‘*kwere-kwere*’ (a foreigner from other parts of the African continent) in your place, as they explained. The politics of ‘race’, unfair labour practices, complex expressions of xenophobia and what was felt to be a deeply racist employment context, also appeared in the margins of young women’s narrations.

There is also the factor that in Chesterville – one of the poorer urban ghettos in KwaZulu-Natal – the presence and visibility of the unemployed is historically part of what has defined this community. I often comment to my family when I am home how I lose sense of ‘working time’, as I am always surrounded by people without formal work. Unemployment, in other words, has become part of the social fabric and atmosphere of this community. It would perhaps be strange and shocking to many if most people left for work and this ghetto were suddenly visibly quiet during the day. To be unemployed, to ‘sit around’ and be ‘idle’, does not necessarily place you within the category of ‘abnormal’, since there are many others who are in the same situation. In the township context we must always take into consideration that the self-employed, especially women running shebeens, selling food and selling dagga, are also included in the term ‘unemployed’.

## **Repeated experiences of death, funerals and HIV/AIDS**

Linked closely to the aspects of generational violence that I have discussed are ways in which death has become such an embedded part of daily life in Black communities. While I cannot go into aspects of the multitude of unaccounted for deaths during early colonial encounters of violence, recent experiences of so-called political deaths have also received very little attention in South African social studies. This is puzzling, as it is a well-known fact that there have been constant and regular dealings with death in these communities.

The linking of ‘the dead’ with apartheid violence is not only traceable to the fact that the state was responsible for many deaths in townships, but also that it actively participated in the separation of the dead from the living. This further illustrates my point of the participation of the state in attacking people’s cultural resources. Feldman (2002) has referred to the apartheid state’s participation in the hiding and burning of Black people’s bodies as part of the hidden history of the South African state. After all, a large part of this oppressive state was predicated on the erasure of Black people’s history, memories and meaning structures. It is worth highlighting that many African-centred healing systems do not only involve the individual and the community, but also the healing of topographies. The recent digging up of ‘hidden graves’, where masses of Black bodies were mutilated by apartheid’s assassins, thus constituted a moment of re-memory for several families who had lost loved ones during apartheid. For death without mourning constitutes death without reflexivity (Linke conversation). This has the effect of paralysing individuals’ sense of cosmological continuity, which continues to be an important sphere in African life.

In the 1980s, regular mass political funerals, mostly of young men murdered by the state and/or vigilante groups, meant that women’s ‘caring’ and ‘compassionate’ roles in

death practices were severely stretched. Since the 1970s until today, women have become weary of burying their young children. Nowadays you will hear parents affected by the death of young people lament that 'death has never been so bad' in their communities (Evelina pers. comm.). An interesting aspect to point out is that the Black body of the 1980s was politicised, and celebrated in the name of liberation, as evidenced in songs – such as '*Amagugu alelizwe*' and '*Senzeni na?*' – which were collectively harmonised during funeral processions. And as Cornel West (in Cowan 2003) points out when talking about the spiritual suffering of African-Americans, this musical response to psychic wounds and emotional scars by oppressed people enacts their creativity, dignity, grace and elegance, so important in preserving their humanity. However, this availability of *music as a cultural buffer* in times of pain is absent when confronted with the AIDS-ridden body. The ailing HIV/AIDS body is never seen; it is privatised and experienced as a source of shame for newly 'liberated' Black South Africans. It is of particular frustration to the emerging group of confident, middle-class Blacks, who have become the central actors responsible for performing 'independence' and 'freedom' in the public spheres of politics and business. Currently, the burden of caring for this ailing body and mourning it becomes primarily the responsibility of the family, in which few want to share. This isolation, as well as being marked by a 'bad death', are experienced as traumatic by individual families.

This experience of living intimately with (particularly) HIV/AIDS-related deaths in communities such as Chesterville has also generated a whole set of *popular languages about 'speaking HIV/AIDS'*. As researchers we are then encouraged to explore how expressive cultural forms, explicitly not linked to issues of HIV/AIDS, are mobilised and do in fact 'speak' to HIV/AIDS. The question of what happens when death, not life, structures your everyday, invites us to then 'see' how those who live in such environments tame and domesticate HIV/AIDS so that they can simply live with it in their everyday lives. I do not think it is an accident that in South Africa HIV/AIDS is commonly referred to as ADIDAS (three stripes of the brand name), Z3 (the BMW sports car), Number 3 (gesture with three fingers) and Hlengiwe Ivy Vilakazi. The latter is a typical Zulu woman's name and surname in KwaZulu-Natal. Referring to HIV/AIDS as 'Hlengiwe Ivy Vilakazi' signals that the virus is something very intimate and familiar to everyone; *she* could potentially be anyone you know. These everyday examples reflect daily attempts by individuals to domesticate and live with the disease by recomposing its meaning through linking it to both highly desired material and intimate objects, while at the same time feminising it. However, what is interesting is that from the 'outside' this could easily be interpreted as collective denial. However, if we take a closer look, we will find that these attempts also bring to our attention the ways in which individuals and communities *mobilise available cultural resources* to live intimately with death. In addition, there is the daily distancing from thinking about AIDS all the time in order to cope with its constancy and, especially, its deaths.

Statements such as 'It's not something you think about all the time', 'You keep it at the back of your head because you must live' and 'sex is life' (see below) surface in young women's narrations. Included as well are notions of refusal, which incorporate invincibility, to confront the actual existence of HIV/AIDS – 'this will not happen to me', typical of the adventure spirit in youth identities.

There are other reasons for not wanting to talk directly about HIV/AIDS. Young women are also strategically avoiding the unknown, since they have no guarantees that they are exempt from being next in what is generally perceived as inevitable death. Such fears are grounded in the fact that many of them swear that they would not put themselves through the nerve-wracking experience of testing, since they have all had unprotected sex in their recent past. We must also keep in mind that in communities where uncertainty and anxiety dominate the structuring of everyday experience, rumours of whether one is positive or not can quickly acquire the status of incontestable truth. Finally, there appears a fear in actually mouthing the words HIV/AIDS, as if *saying it* is tantamount to unleashing its destructive power over you. That is, the power of *speaking certain words* has effects which go far beyond this physical world. The combination of these domesticating acts, distancing and often blind refusals, points to new ways of how young women are structuring aspects of denial as well as coping in their lives. In other words, what these young women highlight is that denial and coping are not monolithic forms of action, but rather, often involve the embodiment of ambivalent ideas and behaviours which have become part of their sexual subjectivities.

When I enquired about whether losing family members and friends, and witnessing neighbours deteriorating from HIV/AIDS, had any effect on how young women were reviewing notions of sex and even life, this is how groups of friends responded:

SBONGILE: Maybe 2 per cent think about it [HIV/AIDS] in Chesterville...going out and having *sex is life*...Even when you know about HIV, it won't stop you living...You won't leave it just because...especially if you have started doing it...Of course you will be scared...but this is not something you will be looking at/thinking about all the time...that you might have it...*it's not something you look at all the time...*

INTERVIEWER: There are many rumours, because we don't talk about it openly, there will be a rumour that so and so died from AIDS. Others have told me that even if somebody knows that this person died from AIDS there will still be other young women going with him...Is this true?

ALL RESPONDENTS [simultaneously]: Yes, Yes.

DUDU: It happens a lot...a lot, a lot...I mean it happens to such a great extent...Maybe it's because people take this thing [HIV/AIDS] and *put it at the back of their minds and choose to forget that it will affect me...*

A pair of 16-year-old friends added:

MALINDI: Yes, there are billboards, TV and radio about protected sex or abstain from sex, birth control, condoms, everything but they don't listen...A guy will say I want skin-to-skin and as a girl you are so emotionally involved...I love him...I can't say no...he needs me...You see things like that...or you think he will see somebody who is better than me...

NANA: Girls don't care about AIDS and all the diseases that are there, because no one uses condoms...It is true...It doesn't seem as if they love themselves, or think...Some girls at my school [in the township] sleep around with a group of friends...

These conversations opened up discussions about safe sex, particularly the issue of condom use, or rather non-use. All except one of the women I spoke to mentioned using condoms regularly. They were all aware that using condoms is one of the most effective ways of limiting the spread of HIV/AIDS and yet, as 26-year-old Nonhlanhla, put it:

Another thing that frustrates me are those people who make fun of those who are HIV positive because we don't like to check our status...Like me I have never been for a blood test meanwhile I'm criticising someone who's HIV positive. Also I have a boyfriend and we don't use condoms...They lie when they say they use them...

The topic of funeral attendance generated a lot of sighs as young women expressed their fatigue at the constancy of deaths taking place around them:

HLENGIWE: There was a time I was attending so many funerals in a month, weekend to weekend. We would ask ourselves, now who are we burying this weekend?...Now it's casual to talk about funerals.

NONHLANHLA: Sometimes we used to attend funeral Saturday and Sunday...

INTERVIEWER: Do people mention how the person died at the funeral?

HLENGIWE: No! No!

NONHLANHLA: I went to a funeral where they said that the person had died of AIDS.

HLENGIWE: No I wasn't in the church when they said that...But now I remember you and [L] told me about it, what they said...

NONHLANHLA: Yes...her sister said that she died of AIDS, that whoever was dating her must go for a blood test. Lots of people were angry with her and they told her off...But I was glad because she had guts...

And an angry revelation by the 16-year-old friends:

NANA: Recently, [X] she was our age and she died from AIDS...You see her friends, it's like they didn't learn anything from her death...as if nothing has happened this year...they were her friends, they used to go out with her...

MALINDI: They started talking about her behind her back...

NANA: At her funeral nobody was willing to stand up and say something...When she was alive they used to go out with her partying and stuff...When she was sick nobody was there for her, there were friends for now...You just have to live your life...me I am not here from my friends, this is my life...

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean they are still doing the same things?

MALINDI: Doing the bad things they were doing with her when she was still alive...Dealing with different cars...getting pregnant and then aborting babies...Nothing else...They just don't see the use of using condoms...They will tell you that they and a condom rubber don't mix...Her name was [X] and she was from Road [Y].

INTERVIEWER: Have you attended many funerals?

BOTH RESPOND: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Does all this dying scare you?

NANA: It scares and it hurts...when you see young girls doing these wrong things...

MALINDI: There are so many beliefs about death...Right now I prefer to keep my mouth shut...Well I don't know what to believe in...When my time comes, so let it be...but it hurts...

When I asked whether people were not afraid of living within this atmosphere where death had become such a norm, one of the women quickly responded:

ZINHLE: If we were, why are there *so many pregnant women*?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I want to talk about this pregnancy issue...Why are there so many young pregnant women here...What's going on?

ALL [speaking at the same time]: Oh my God we were just talking about that the other day...

NONHLANHLA: There is someone I know who fell pregnant and then she did deliver the baby but it passed away within three months...Let me tell you something she's pregnant again and she is HIV positive, the baby was buried this

year January...There is an older child before this one and this is her third pregnancy.

HLENGIWE: Some want to prove themselves, prove by having babies that they are not positive. When I was pregnant and I was at the clinic...even nurses do ask us to have blood tests so that they can give your baby AZT...And we will all go for the tests but when the time comes for us to pick up our result...No one will go [laughs]...The nurse will tell us that, girls your results are back girls...We will be like, Do they think we are crazy? I'm not interested to know my status.

The juxtaposition of death and life is constant in these young women's narrations, and was particularly emphasised when we started discussing the issue of pregnancy in a time of HIV/AIDS. Discussions on pregnancy and HIV/AIDS continue to be a taboo area, and some feminists have attempted to bring in these issues through the lens of reproductive rights (Tallis 2002). However, moving beyond a rights-based discourse, Patricia McFadden (1992) argues that HIV/AIDS is once again forcing us to rethink unresolved questions around fertility, family planning, motherhood and womanhood in Africa. For example, she asks whether the resistance to contraception and the use of condoms is linked to a desire for children by both women and men which goes beyond the cultural, economic and emotional reasons previously assumed. In cases where the woman and the man know their HIV-positive status, McFadden suggests that this lingering knowledge of a possible death may very well generate an even more intense desire to perpetuate oneself through giving birth to a child. Further, with the growing knowledge around interventions such as AZT for pregnant women, one of the women mentioned that even though the parents would eventually *die*, what remained important was that the children would live.

I also observed amongst mothers who are aware of their positive status that the birth of a living child appears to symbolically 'inject' them with a desire to 'live and be alive'. In other words, it provides a way to structure their lives from a position of life as opposed to from a position of death, which being associated with the virus continues to suggest in township residents' popular imaginations. Perhaps, more accurately, it is a fusion of a new mode of existence that incorporates both metaphors of life and death for these mothers, who are also keen to participate fully in motherhood. Ultimately, this demonstrates the extent to which childbearing remains a deeply embedded socialised instinct for many women which, as McFadden (1992) has also observed, remains hard to relinquish even in a time of HIV/AIDS.

Another factor we need to consider is that in conducting everyday sexual relations from a position of 'not knowing' (as several young women attest they would never go for an HIV/AIDS test), giving birth to a healthy baby becomes physical evidence for all to witness that the mother and, by extension, the father are also physically healthy. Surprisingly, this was considered by young women as one of the most compelling reasons why someone would choose to fall pregnant during this time.

There are issues around *sacrifice* that need to be looked into here. An area which also surfaced in conversations, and which needs more research attention, is the choice some young women are making to bear children with men who are openly known in the community to be HIV positive.

MPUMI: Here in Chesterville we don't talk about it and we don't care...Let say I'm dating someone who is HIV positive and I didn't know...and people will tell me about his status. I will not dump him I will carry on and the sad part is I will fall pregnant by him...You see things like that...I don't know whether it's poverty or just plain stupidity...or you want to prove to others that what they saying about him is not true...I don't know what's going through their minds when this happens...

HLENGIWE: They date them like nothing is wrong...The worst part is when they fall pregnant.

NONHLANHLA: The way I see it is maybe they want [to] see that will they survive after a baby...

As mentioned earlier, condom use continues to be the cornerstone of HIV/AIDS prevention strategies. While the national Department of Health has reported a drop in HIV/AIDS incidence amongst youth in South Africa, it has also reported an increase in infection amongst the older age groups, especially married couples. A consistent finding that studies continue to report is that people in relationships for longer periods of time use condoms less frequently than those in relationships for shorter periods (Rivers & Aggleton 1999), a social reality echoed by one of the women: 'I mean really you get so comfortable in your relationship with your boyfriend that after two or three months...Hawu! The condom is out...'

Low frequency in condom use is thus also intricately linked to intimacy issues of trust and expectation of faithfulness between partners, which many women are reluctant to jeopardise. However, what complicates these notions of intimacy is that many of these young women often have a sense that even though they are choosing to have sex with their partners 'skin-to-skin', they remain aware that their partner may have other sexual partners.

This normative acceptance of multiple male partnering within heterosexual relationships appears to be a deeply woven one within township women's subjectivities, and tends to be mediated by a combination of a choice 'not to know', a form of 'denial', or to consider 'knowing as poisonous'. As one young woman explained:

Another thing is that when you have a boyfriend who lives here in Chesterville...Chesterville is small, we all know each other and boys are naughty...let's say he lives here in Road 12 and I will be proudly walking with him and you don't know that maybe in the morning he was with another

girlfriend...and people will tell you because this is Chesterville and Chesterville is small. They will tell you that in the morning – there was a girl with him...and I will be aware when I come and see him...it is better if he lives far from me because I will not know if he has another girl...

In this specific case the issue is then not whether he has several partners, but the humiliation and loss of dignity and respect that will be suffered in visibly knowing he has other women. One of the keys to maintaining viable intimacies revolved around formulating discreet practices between sexually intimate partners. Therefore, spending shared moments and experiences together and also allowing the distancing of specific knowledge of other possible partners, defines this experience of intimacy. These two positions are not necessarily experienced as conflictual, but rather as a mode of experiencing intimacy where multiple male partnering has for a long time been a visible norm.

It would be short-sighted to frame this notion of intimacy as ‘irrational’ or simply as a form of denial by these young women. In some ways these young women are also reflecting back the kinds of intimate relationships that are deemed acceptable in their communities. As many of them tried to make clear to me, this was not a partnering practice that they did not challenge within their own intimate relationships. Rather, what they tried to highlight was that, given the contexts in which their subjectivities were being formulated – which, amongst other things, were characterised by material lack; an acceptance of multiple partnering for men and, in more hidden ways, multiple partnering for women; a refusal to engage the pleasures of sex, especially for women; daily hustling and survival – they were also enacting survival strategies that might potentially transcend these very social environments that were structured to numb them and make them not *feel*.

These interventions, which could be termed *flawed agency*, were often shaped in their own terms, taking into account their own lives, not yours or mine. Even within a context of HIV/AIDS we must not lose sight of the *underlying layers shaping intimacies*, and an acknowledgement that these relationships are also being shaped by sexual desire, attraction and the hunger for closeness. Even within these economically depressed situations, young women relate how they will leave relationships where they feel they are not receiving some emotional and material necessities, which are often the precursors of sexual danger.

To illustrate these points, Nelisiwe explained in length how for years she had kept two men and recently dropped the long-term boyfriend after he had a second baby with the publicly ‘known’ mother of his children. She herself had a baby at 16 with a man she was no longer involved with, and who is currently in jail for ‘ukuphanta’, house-breaking in this case. However, she did not perceive herself to be the ‘other woman’ and, in fact, she jokingly related that polygamy (*isithembu*) was still very much alive in urban townships. She explained that what was really at stake was one’s choice in a man and whether he was able to fulfil his emotional and material obligations to both women.

It seemed clear to her that with the second child on the way, her man would be unable to fulfil his emotional and material obligations to her.

Other women admitted to having men on the side, specifically for purposes of '*ukuphanta*', that is, to survive each day, as the majority of them were without employment. When asked if condoms were ever used, all the women I interviewed, except one, said they were not used, and that men desired 'skin-to-skin'. Some women openly expressed their own discomfort with noisy and intrusive condoms, and their preference for 'skin-to-skin' sexual exchange.

Interestingly, Christine Glover-Walton (2001) in her study on HIV/AIDS and condom use in the Eastern Cape found that the best predictor of condom use was the number of people one knew who had died from AIDS. However, what was disturbing was that condom use was higher among those who knew four or fewer people who had died from AIDS, than it was among those who knew more than four.

A focus on the local and subjective forces does not mean that global forces at work in communities are necessarily hidden. In fact, my interaction with these young women highlights precisely how far-reaching national and global economic policies are, penetrating and *transforming sociality and intersubjectivity between members of poor communities*. In other words, these national state and global forces of neo-liberal economic policies were also crucially shaping strategies for survival, and loosening and creating 'new' meanings around viable relationships with the opposite sex. For example, one of the young women I spoke to told me how important it was to have a man with cash, as everybody in the household was unemployed. This meant that she relied on one of her boyfriends to supply her with money to purchase an electricity card. This system of purchasing electricity is a new one in South Africa and coincides with the present government's economic policy (Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy), which prioritises the privatisation of basic services. Recently, members of the Electricity and Water Campaign were arrested for protests against state plans to privatise water in South Africa's poor urban communities. In other words, these narrations show the ways in which forces of changing political economies not only affect the structural elements of these women's lives, but even *enter their subjective constructions of intimacy*.

Finally, what these young women's narrations also force us to realise is that these are also recollections that attempt to map out ways of *loving in a time when social meanings are collapsing and/or in crisis*. In an attempt to restore some notion of order and continuity, these young women are reasserting their own meanings to these existential questions. Their ways of going about it may be morally unacceptable to many, but this does not diminish their desire to find their own answers to explain these dilemmas.

## **Strategies of survival in Black urban townships as expressed in the philosophy and practice of 'ukuphanta'**

### **First attempts at defining 'ukuphanta'**

'Ukuphanda' or 'ukuphanta' is a philosophy and practice of survival which can be summarised as a way of 'getting by', 'making ends meet'. Although the term means doing anything that will bring in money, in the township it is mainly used to describe 'illegal'/non-conventional ways to make ends meet. For example, a shoplifter will tell you that she is doing '*uyaphanta*' (the act of 'getting by', 'surviving') because she uses the money from shoplifting to feed her family; a young girl involved with a rich 'sugar-daddy' who helps her poor family is another example of 'ukuphanta'.

Whether the money is acquired legally or not, 'ukuphanta' is an accepted way of surviving in the townships. You find parents or mothers of unemployed youth complaining about their children who still look to them for support, when they can go out and '*phanda*'. Young women do not want a boyfriend who is still dependent on his parents. He is expected to '*phanda*', meaning that he must go out there and 'try' something. It does not matter whether that something is legal or not, as long as it brings money to the household. What needs to be noted is that the illegal ways of 'ukuphanta' are always risky but often bring quick cash. Hence those who '*phanda*' are popular and seen to be the possessors of style. We also need to take note that in the absence of rites-of-passage rituals previously performed in African communities, 'ukuphanta' has progressively become an *articulation of independence* for those living in urban ghettos.

There are also differences in the ways that women and men '*phanda*', which are closely linked to aspects of femininity and masculinity. Men who make a living from 'ukuphanta' often dress well and are seen as more generous to their girlfriends, providing them with countless gifts which often include stolen goods. Let me elaborate a little further on this issue of masculinity and femininity. When women '*phanta*' this often means they shoplift, or they are engaged in strategies to extract money from potential sexual partners. Sometimes it is also linked to microeconomic ways of survival, such as earning money by braiding hair, looking after babies, cleaning households, or selling items such as cigarettes, alcohol, dagga, sweets, chips and *vetkoek* (sweetcake) to others in the township. In the context of Chesterville, where the notion of 'ukuphanta' for men is an old one, it means housebreaking, pickpocketing, stealing cars, or general theft from stores in the city centre and/or from white people's homes and, increasingly, from wealthier Black people's homes. Interestingly, when these same strategies are used amongst struggling people in the township – that is, when 'troublesome' youth steal from their neighbours – other township residents quickly label these actions as theft, and not as part of 'ukuphanta'. These actions highlight the ways communities shape the construction of boundaries around what they perceive to be 'part of' or 'not part of' their communities. Other more sophisticated forms of 'ukuphanta' include white-collar crimes such as fraud, especially credit card fraud.

In the context of Chesterville there are elaborate mythical stories of heroes and heroines who are expert '*phantas*' (those who *phanta*). There is even an established hierarchy. Those who engage in the ways of '*ukuphanta*' that involve more danger and risk, such as housebreaking and general theft, are perceived by the majority as 'real men'. This masculinity is enhanced when they use their fast cash on girlfriends, their mothers and friends. These are known as '*isikhokho*' (the resilient crust left after making pap). Furthermore, the danger and risk ripple through to other facets of living, as being '*isikhokho*' means being highly desired by both women and men. And being in the high-risk business of being '*amaphanta*', many of these young men, to counteract the stresses and uncertainty they experience daily, seek pleasure and escape through 'hanging out' with friends, intense partying and consuming alcohol and dagga. Here we observe how the notion of creating normativity out of risk has been a long-embodied one in urban ghettos.

The opposite of '*amaphanta*' is reflected in the creation of categories such as '*abafana bo ma*' (mommy's boys) and '*izinyoni*' (birds). '*Abafana bo ma*' are young boys who dress in the latest fashions, but it is widely known that they do not '*phanta*' for their clothes; rather, they are purchased by their parents – in Chesterville, this means their mothers. '*Izinyoni*' are those men who are easily tricked out of cash and often work legitimately for a living. Being 'mommy's boy' or '*inyoni*' is tantamount to not being a 'real man', terms which are heavily policed by young women in the township. Further, these activities of '*ukuphanta*' are seen to incorporate certain rituals that impart the skills of being an 'urban survivor' to many of these formally uneducated and unemployed young men and women. Incorporated into this act of 'naming' are issues of masculinity, status and contextually formulated forms of authority. It is then not unusual for those who are '*abafana bo ma*' or '*izinyoni*' to seek to escape the usual growing-up pressures and stigmas by joining '*amaphanta*'. My younger brother related to me how most of his friends, known as 'mommy's boys', had opted to become '*amaphanta*' and were now either in jail or had died. Those engaged in white-collar crimes were usually older men who had initially started out at the more risky level of '*ukuphanta*', though this was not universal.

On the other hand, women's strategies of '*ukuphanta*' are predominantly directed towards men who have cash. Women's techniques are subtler and in many ways more complex, often involving coded forms of extraction.

### **Men with cash**

Choosing a 'man with potential' who can support you was a central concern in how these young women selected possible partners. As they explained:

NONHLANHLA: We are very choosy people, me and my friends...You showing up without a car [shakes head disapprovingly]...and me I love money that's no secret...you can come with no car but you must be financially covered...It's not wrong. You must be able to give me money and I love money and I don't think

this a problem. Without a car, no money and he's not working...that is burden...what are we going to eat?

MPUMI: How will he take you out?

NONHLANHLA: Yes the only thing we will do is to have sex. That what's on his mind...Somebody who does not understand will think I am a bad person. There are guys who come and offer love it's just that Eish...You see...

The targeting of especially older men with cash by young women has been linked to transactional sex – this is sex in exchange for money, gifts, favours, payment of clothing accounts, consumption goods such as cellphones and airtime, and household groceries – which has been linked to increasing women's risk of HIV infection. Mark Hunter (2002) draws a useful distinction between 'sex linked to subsistence' and 'sex linked to consumption', even though we must remember that in everyday township life these concepts are intermeshed and are dependent on the current needs as defined by the young women themselves. In the case of sex linked to subsistence, gifts from these relationships can contribute to the household economy, as 24-year-old Sbongile outlines:

In my family nobody is working so when I go out with a man, I must at least come with something, you see. I just can't come back in the morning and go for the bread meant for the children when I have been away all night...what is that...They all expect that I come with something at home...even R10 to buy bread and milk at least...But hey now my boyfriend is tight on the pocket...so when he is very drunk and sleeping, I go to his pockets and I take some money [laughs] and go home in the morning...

Sbongile makes it clear that there is an unspoken expectation at home that after a 'night out' with her boyfriend, she must come home with 'something' that contributes to the household economy. In a situation where a woman cannot meet her family needs because her man is unemployed, she can strategise around 'picking up another man'. Instead of her being seen as loose or objectified, a young woman may feel empowered because she now has the ability to earn money.

In a comparable study based in Mandeni township in KwaZulu-Natal, Hunter (2002) found similar tacit approval by parents of the practices mentioned by Sbongile. Part of the reason behind the support for such strategies can be traced back to the embeddedness of '*ukuphanta*', the silently accepted way of 'getting by' in order to survive. Many parents in fact coerce their girl children to 'go out there' and find ways 'to get by'. It is for these reasons that how and why transactional sex takes place in Chesterville is also linked to material socio-economic realities. It is thus not surprising that a study such as the one on gendered violence in Soweto found that those who reported intimate partner violence, problematic substance abuse, overcrowding at home, living in sub-standard housing and working long hours, were also more likely to report transactional sex (Dunkle et al. 2003). This comprehensive study conducted by Dunkle for the

Medical Research Council confirms earlier studies which have found a significant link between transactional sex and violence.

Other important reasons why transactional sex has been argued to increase the risk of HIV infection is that it tends to limit women's sexual autonomy and ability to negotiate healthy sexual preferences, and also that it encourages multiple partnering amongst women. It is common to hear young women in townships jokingly talking about their 'minister of transport' (for mobility), 'minister of finance' (for cash), or the more common 'sugar daddy' (older men, often married), who cater for their consumption and/or subsistence needs. What is clear in these conversations with young women is the extent of their agency, albeit shaped by socio-economic and gendered inequalities, in accessing material resources in a context of lack. As several authors have noted about these actions of township women, they serve to both challenge and reproduce the very patriarchal structures they continue to be embedded in (Dunkle et al. 2003; Hunter 2002, 2004).

*Sex for consumption* is clearly embroiled in the consumption culture fast emerging in South Africa, and in which everyone is eager to participate. Youth from urban ghettos are not excluded from this desire, and in attempts to experience the possibilities of this 'made in china' material culture – humorous vigilance around 'fong-kong' and the 'original' is also emerging to differentiate between various classes of youth in townships – they map out ways to 'shine' despite the economic conditions they must return to. Sex with older men is thus particularly appealing, as they are more likely to drive impressive cars and to have liquid cash to purchase clothing and fast foods. Thomas (2004) concludes that women and girls who use their bodies as commodities usually equate sex and sexuality with a means of empowerment. This forms part of their attempts to transform despair (material, psychological) into pleasure. However, sex (whether it is for subsistence or consumption purposes) equated with empowerment in times of AIDS becomes a potent force. If not the body, then what other forms of agency become available to them?

Finally, we must be open to the idea that sex may also be a way of sustaining a sense of meaning in the face of meaninglessness. Given that many women live in depressed marginal areas, or what they call 'a place with no life', it is not surprising that sex provides a sense of empowerment in the face of hopelessness. Perhaps this is how some exert bodily agency under constrained socio-cultural and economic circumstances.

### **'Ukuchutha inyoni' (to pluck a bird): agency in a time of social fragmentation**

As young women explained, 'izinyoni' and 'amakwere-kwere' (foreigners from other African countries) were easy targets. One of them explained that when you were about to go out with one of these 'easy targets', women would jokingly say to each other, 'I am going to pluck the bird,' or, when identifying a potential easy target, 'Friends, let's pluck that bird.'

Oinas and Jungar (2005) maintain that several feminist accounts tend to portray women as victims, a tendency which has been transferred to HIV/AIDS research. They suggest that this victimhood focus can be problematic, as it may obscure decisions and actions made by women in their everyday lives. Further, it fails to account for the ways women actively participate in daily power struggles to challenge their own intimate relationships. At the same time we may find an overemphasis of agency to be part of a desire by well-meaning, middle-class researchers looking to confer autonomy on their sisters at the margins. Whatever our positionalities, it remains critical to continuously ask ourselves whether the centring of agency and choice really does give us a better understanding of women's lives in communities in pain.

Returning to the notion of agency, clearly when these young women strategise around 'plucking birds', they are enacting bodily agency in their immediate socio-cultural contexts. First, 'plucking' (extracting what you desire from another) involves a task which can be argued to involve the creative ensemble of certain interpersonal skills. This task also requires some form of negotiation between a man and a woman. Within this social exchange, certain kinds of transactions take place which range from extracting cash, food, transport or any other necessities desired at the time. In fact, this wonderfully vivid metaphor used by young women also alerts us to playful ways they incorporate issues of sex, sexuality and exchange into everyday life. Of course we must stress that the issue of *play* takes on a dangerous edge when framed within a context where HIV/AIDS is rampant. So, while we can celebrate young women's ability to make autonomous choices (Emirbayer & Mische 1998), we cannot ignore the environments in which their lives are being shaped. These are places where scarcity and inequality are often played out in and through their bodies. In addition, when we consider the broader social processes of economic marginalisation, political apathy, material lack and employment racism within which their subjectivities are being produced, we are left with celebrating what at best can be termed a *flawed agency*.

## Conclusion

Utilising a socio-cultural framework that centres on concepts of survival, agency, creativity, sex, intimacy, desire, loss and fragmentation, this chapter has attempted to surface how individual and community experiences of living with and around an atmosphere of HIV/AIDS impact on ways they remake their fragile social worlds, using their own generated meanings. Avoiding framing these young women as victims, it has also emphasised the role of their *flawed agency* as they attempt to puzzle together a world where death surrounds them, historical violences continue to resonate in the present, and new violences emerge under our young democracy. In this light, the chapter has also explored the ways the HIV/AIDS pandemic has changed ideas about the nature of sexual desire and how material poverty and social inequalities continue to have a

bearing on the increasing commodification of love and desire, not just in the urban ghettos of South Africa, but globally.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to extend my gratitude to the young women who enthusiastically opened their lives to me. I have learned so much from them, which I hope will also inspire others to know more. Please note that all names used are pseudonyms. My family, particularly my mother, also gave emotional and intellectual support when I was conducting these interviews at home in Durban. The loving help of Qhikiza and Buhlebuyeza, who assisted at various stages of the project, must also be acknowledged. And, as in all my writings, I am always fuelled and nourished by conversations, encouragements, comments, and suggestions from friends and colleagues about the existential challenges Black women continue to face – Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Nomboniso Gasa, Khosi Xulu, Helen Bradford, Maurice Vambe, Jacklyn Cock, Sebastian Matroos, Stella Nyanzi, Monisha Bejaj, Rekopantswe Mate, Alcinda Honwana and Rob Kassimir, whose questions and insights really helped to stretch the horizons of this chapter. Since this work is part of a broader project, I must also acknowledge the financial support from the joint partnership of CODESRIA and the Social Science Research Council to carry out initial primary research.

## REFERENCES

- Bakare-Yusuf B (2003) Fabricating identities: Survival and the imagination in Jamaican dancehall culture. Unpublished manuscript.
- Bolton R (1995) Rethinking anthropology: The study of AIDS. In TH Brummelhuis & G Herdt (Eds) *Culture and sexual risk: Anthropological perspectives on AIDS*. Luxembourg: Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Bonnin D (2000) 'Claiming spaces, changing place': Political violence and women's protests in KwaZulu-Natal. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26(2): 216–301.
- Brummelhuis TH & Herdt G (1995) Introduction: Anthropology in the context of HIV/AIDS. In TH Brummelhuis & G Herdt (Eds) *Culture and sexual risk: Anthropological perspectives on AIDS*. Luxembourg: Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Byarugaba J (nd) Voiceless victims: The impact of political violence on women and children: An assessment of their urgent survival and humanitarian needs. NCRC/UNICEF.
- Carton B (2000) *Blood from your children: The colonial origins of generations of conflict in South Africa*. Charlottesville/London: University Press of Virginia.
- Cowan R (2003) *Cornel West: The politics of redemption*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Das V (1996) Language and the body: Transactions in the construction of pain. *Daedalus*, 125(1): 67–92.
- Dunkle K, Jewkes R, Brown H, McIntyre J, Gray L & Harlow S (2003) Gender-based violence and HIV infection among pregnant women in Soweto. A technical report to the Australian Agency for International Development. June.
- Emirbayer M & Mische A (1998) What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4): 962–1023.
- Feldman A (1991) *Formations of violence: The narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Feldman A (2002) Strange fruit: The South African Truth Commission and the Demonic Economies of Violence. *Social Analysis*, 46(3): 234–265.
- Fine M (1988) Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1): 29–53.
- Glover-Walton CA (2001) HIV/AIDS behavioural changes in the Eastern Cape. Paper presented at the AIDS in context: Explaining the Social, Cultural and Historical Roots of the Epidemic in Southern Africa Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, April.
- Gutteridge W & Spence E (1997) *Violence in Southern Africa*. Portland: Frank Cass.
- Hunter M (2002) The materiality of everyday sex: Thinking beyond prostitution. *African Studies*, 61(1): 99–120.
- Hunter M (2004) Masculinities, multiple sexual partners, and AIDS: The making and unmaking of *Isoka* in KwaZulu-Natal. *Transformation*, 54: 123–153.
- ISIS-WICCE (2001) Medical Interventional Study of War affected Gulu District, Uganda. An ISIS-WICCE Report. Kampala: Graphics.
- Jeffery A (1999) *The truth about the Truth Commission*. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.
- Kleinman A (1992) Pain and resistance: The delegitimisation and re legitimisation of local worlds. In MD Good, PE Brodwin, BJ Good & A Kleinman (Eds) *Pain as a human experience: An anthropological perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mallki L (1995) *Purity and exile: Violence, memory and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- McFadden P (1992) Sex, sexuality and the problems of AIDS in Africa. In R Meena (ed) *Gender in southern Africa: Conceptual and theoretical issues*. Harare: Sapes Books.
- McFadden P (2004) HIV and AIDS: Behind the iconic re-presentations of gender, race and class in southern Africa. Paper presented at the Learning from our Lives: Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Africa Diaspora Conference. Spelman College and SisterLove Inc, 10–12 June.
- Metha P & Chatterji D (2001) Boundaries, names, alterities: A case study of a communal riot in Dharavi, Bombay. In V Das, A Kleinman, A Lock, M Ramphale & P Reynolds (Eds) *Remaking a world: Violence, social suffering and recovery*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Motsemme N (2004) 'The mute always speak': On women's silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Current Sociology*, 52(5): 909–932.
- Nzimande B & Thusi S (1991) *Children of war: The impact of political violence on schooling in Natal*. Education Policy Unit, Durban: University of Natal.
- Oinas E & Jungar K (2005) No passive victims! Agents! The concept of victimhood in contemporary feminist debates, particularly in feminist HIV research. Paper presented at the Writing African Women: Poetics and Politics of African Gender Research Conference. University of the Western Cape, Cape Town. January.
- Parker RG (1995) The social construction of sexual risk, on how to have (sex) research in an epidemic. In TH Brummelhuis & G Herdt (Eds) *Culture and sexual risk: Anthropological perspectives on AIDS*. Luxembourg: Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Ramphale M (2000) Teach me how to be a man: An exploration of the definition of masculinity. In V Das, A Kleinman, M Ramphale & P Reynolds (Eds) *Violence and subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reynolds P (2000) The ground of all making: State violence, the family and political activists. In V Das, A Kleinman, M Ramphale & P Reynolds (Eds) *Violence and subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rivers K & Aggleton P (1999) *Gender and HIV epidemic: Men and the HIV epidemic*. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.
- Ross F (1997) Existing in secret places: Women's testimony in the first five weeks of public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Paper presented to the Faultiness Conference. University of Cape Town, Cape Town. July.
- Scarry E (1985) *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Solheim J (2002) UN envoy for AIDS in Africa paints gloomy picture for House of Bishops. Downloaded on 22 January 2006. Available at <<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/31/50/acns3155.html>>
- Tallis V (2002) Gender and HIV/AIDS: Overview report. Bridge Development–Gender. Institute of Development Studies. Brighton: University of Sussex.
- Thomas MN (2004) The feminization of HIV/AIDS in Trinidad and Tobago. Paper presented at the Learning from our Lives: Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Africa Diaspora Conference. Spelman College and SisterLove Inc, 10–12 June.
- Tin H (2001) Children in violent spaces: A reinterpretation of the 1976 Soweto uprising. In A Zegeye (ed) *Social identities in the new South Africa: After apartheid* (vol. 1). Kwela Books and South African History Online.

## CONVERSATIONS

Evelina (pseudonym), domestic worker and single mother. Pretoria, 5 November 2003.

Linke Uli, associate professor of cultural anthropology at the Rochester Institute of Technology, USA. Budapest, July 2003.

# Invisible lives, inaudible voices? The social conditions of migrant women in Johannesburg

CAROLINE WANJIKU KIHATO

Migration studies have been dominated by economic models that measure the costs and benefits of the process on a variety of levels – regional, national, community, and individual. Much of the literature consequently gauges population movements' material costs and benefits for migrants, households, hosts and source countries or regions. With their focus on economic engagement and wage labour, scholars have typically overlooked the active role women play in the migration process as women are analytically consigned to the home or informal economy. The increased feminisation of migration is, however, challenging this and directing academics and practitioners' attention to a broader range of women's experiences. But much of this literature focuses on instances of overt exploitation; portraying women as passive participants or victims without individual or collective agency or social status. Consequently, a growing body of literature has recently begun highlighting the shortcomings of these perspectives, illustrating women's agency and how they sometimes manipulate exploitative conditions to their advantage. Using accounts from cross-border migrant women in Johannesburg, this chapter reveals how women are moving, the mechanisms they use to do so, and the meanings they ascribe to these movements. In doing so, it collapses binary conceptual frames that depict women either as victims or as victors in the migration process and provides a deeper understanding of the socio-political dynamics in areas that have become primary regional or global destinations for migrants.

Scholarly writings in the migration literature of the 1960s and 1970s focused almost exclusively on male migrants. At the time, development economists such as Todaro (1969) and Sjaastad (1962) argued that wage differentials between regions constituted the most important causal factor for the movement of populations. With migration explained as a consequence of regional economic imbalances and employment, scholars typically focused on 'productive' (read, male) labour. In most instances, this drew attention to the historically high demand for male labour and discounted women as

analytically and economically unimportant. Where women are discussed in this literature, they are often portrayed as passive participants in the migration process, moving either to accompany a male spouse or guardian or staying at home and receiving occasional remittances from male migrants (Adepoju 1995; Gugler & Ludwar-Ene 1995).

It is not that alternative literature did not exist at this time. Anthropological and sociological studies of early urbanisation in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s did engage with the social aspects of migration, and illustrate how mobility was changing traditional social structures and decision-making processes (see Colsen 1971; Hellman 1948; Mayer 1962). But this literature did not provide a causal explanation for migration. Rather, its analysis focused on the social consequences of such movements, while remaining rooted within economic explanations for mobility. When people's movements are largely understood in terms of their contributions to the formal economy, critical aspects of the process are lost, and women's experiences are among the most striking omissions from this literature (Boyd 2003).

A variety of factors have together resulted in highlighting the experiences of women in the migration literature. Firstly, reactions to narrow economicistic explanations of migration opened up the space for the exploration of other causal factors of migration. Ethnographic research, for example, has highlighted the importance of social over material ties in causing migration (see Guyer 1981). Political economy literature stresses the importance of political repression, and ethnic, national and religious conflicts as triggers for emigration (Faist 2000). While providing alternative explanations for population movements, this literature also pries open spaces for a deeper examination of the role of women in the migration process, because of their centrality in social networks and the direct adverse impact of political instability on their lives and those of their children. Secondly, growing interest in gender studies in the academy brought with it increasing calls for a gendered analysis of migration. Consequently, gendered treatments of the migration process have resulted in the emergence of a body of literature that highlights the experiences of women migrants in Africa (see, for example, Abusharaf 2001; Bonner 1990; Bozzoli 1991; Walker 1990; White 1990). Thirdly, the sheer increase in the number of women migrating globally since the second half of the twentieth century has forced scholarly and policy attention towards understanding the phenomenon that many now term 'the feminisation migration' (see, for example, Abusharaf 2001; Adepoju 2004; Chammartin 2001; Sander & Maimbo 2003; Zlotnik 2003). Since 1965, female migration globally has grown as a proportion of total migration (Chammartin 2001). According to Zlotnik, female migration has increased steadily in Africa, up from 42.7 per cent in 1960 to 46.7 per cent in 2000 (Zlotnik 2003: 6). While regional differences exist within the continent (Zlotnik 2003), it is evident that women are increasingly migrating independently of their spouses or male guardians and shaping the nature of migration on the continent (Sander & Maimbo 2003; Zlotnik 1998).

Despite acknowledging women's growing involvement and importance in migration, the issues captured in the recent literature have been disappointingly narrow and have typically focused on their vulnerability to trafficking, prostitution, and coerced or

otherwise exploitative labour (see Aghatise 2004; Chammartin 2001; Piper 2003). The parameters of the debate on the feminisation of migration have also been largely defined by the west's growing concern with the influx of migrant women from eastern Europe, Africa and Asia into the domestic, caring and sex industries (Agustin 2005). Works on migrant women's domestic labour describe the manipulative nature of their recruitment, the poor conditions of labour, their lack of choices, which result in women being captives of their employers, pimps and husbands in their host environment (see Andermahr et al. 2002). Like earlier analyses of women in migration, the growing interest in the feminisation of migration sometimes unwittingly reproduces perceptions of women's passivity and their lack of agency in the process. Further, much of this discourse is framed around a moral concern, with western scholars endeavouring to 'save' women from these inhumane practices (Agustin 2003: 378), and a human rights agenda that seeks to impose mechanisms to stop the trafficking of women and children.

Invisibly and silently, a fundamental change is taking place in migration flows of poor but enterprising people on their way to what they hope is the promised land. More often than not, the new migrants are women. They are exploited and often sold into prostitution or forced to work for excessively long hours. Measures should be taken now for putting a stop to this exploitation.  
(Chammartin 2001: 39)

While potentially well intentioned, these representations reinforce images of migrant women as victims whose destiny is dictated by others. Characteristically labelling women as 'victims' objectifies them – their lives, feelings and humanness are rendered invisible and they are transformed into stereotypical cardboard characters. More importantly, it denies them agency, as victims have no ability or power to change their circumstances. Agustin articulates how the concern around trafficking and exploitation has continued to make women migrants invisible:

In the majority of press accounts, migrant women are presented as selling sex in the street, while in public forums and academic writing they are constructed as 'victims of trafficking.' The obsession with 'trafficking' obliterates not only all the human agency necessary to undertake migrations but the experiences of migrants who do not engage in sex work. Many thousands of women who more or less chose to sell sex as well as all women working in domestic or caring services are 'disappeared' when moralistic and often sensationalistic topics are the only ones discussed. (2003: 378)

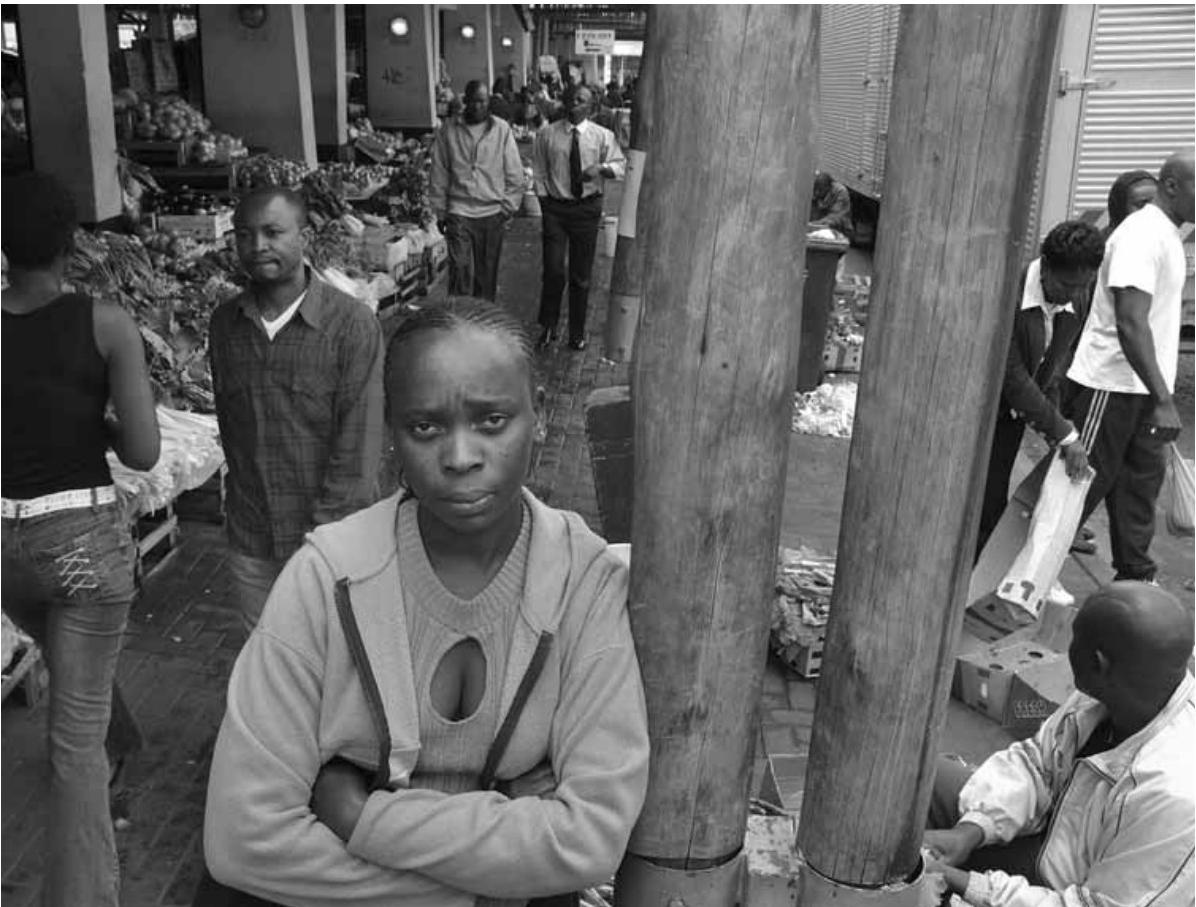
Even literature that explicitly challenges the labels that hide women and make their lives invisible, unwittingly falls back into the trap of dehumanising migrant women. In her chapter on the development of the migrant labour system in the 1850s to 1930s in South Africa, Walker seeks to challenge notions of migrant women as victims who are 'left behind', lumped along with children, the old and the sick into the emotive but

blurry category of the ‘dispossessed’ or ‘surplus’ (1990: 168). But in the end, she substitutes one set of labels for another and resorts to what she tries to reject by labelling migrant women as ‘runaway wives’ and ‘runaway daughters’. In addition, her conclusion that women moved from a traditional form of patriarchy and subjugation to a state-controlled, subordinated status in the economy and urban areas fails to provide a complex analysis of how women negotiated these changing forms of patriarchy in everyday life. Consequently, her analysis is simplistic and reverts to perpetuating images of women as lacking agency.

Amongst the gendered literature of migrant women in early colonial periods in Africa, the works of Bozzoli (1991) and White (1990) are most notable for their complex treatments of the roles of women in colonial cities, and their shifting relationships with traditional patriarchy ‘back home’ in rural areas. While writing about different groups of women, White about prostitutes in colonial Nairobi, and Bozzoli about domestic workers in apartheid Johannesburg, both authors show how the women they write about are more than the subordinate or disempowered characters they are often perceived as being. Both Bozzoli and White challenge views that migrant women are victims, and constantly illustrate that they have agency even when in oppressive situations.

But the victim/victor, visible/invisible dichotomies that emerge in debates do not adequately describe or explain the lives of migrant women. Authors that highlight women’s agency and those that depict women’s victimhood construct binary conceptual frameworks, which pigeonhole women in either one or the other category. These categories are blinded to the complex realities of women migrants’ lives, which reflect women who are at once victims and victors, visible and invisible, audible and silent in processes of migration. Bozzoli (1991) makes a powerful point when she concludes that the women of Phokeng cannot be understood either as agents or as victims, for boxing them in any of these categories only leads to contradictions which cannot be resolved in these binary ways.

Resonating with Bozzoli’s work, my research shows that as a migrant woman goes about her daily life in Johannesburg, she embodies multiple identities, sometimes using them strategically to her own advantage, and at other times bearing the burden of who she is. Using narratives of a group of women from sub-Saharan Africa in Johannesburg in post-apartheid South Africa, my work reaches similar conclusions to those reached by Bozzoli in her analysis of women of Phokeng in the mid-nineteenth century. But whereas Bozzoli’s work speaks of a group of women participating in a particular apartheid-era economic niche, my work speaks of a greater diversity of women in terms of class and nationality, in a post-apartheid epoch. It draws attention to inner-city Johannesburg, an area that was once off limits to all black migrants, and one that is currently dominated by discourses of violence, crime and urban regeneration. In doing this, it provides insight into some of the social dynamics that are occurring there. Using frameworks of analysis that allow the complexity of women’s everyday lives to emerge, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of the character of migration patterns occurring in contemporary Johannesburg and, by extension, across the continent.



Women are increasingly migrating independently and shaping the nature of migration on the African continent.

## Research method

Correcting the blinkers that limit much research on migrant women requires an approach that highlights women's perceptions of their situation, environment, and experiences. To do this, this chapter uses primary qualitative data as well as survey material conducted by the Wits Forced Migration Studies Programme in conjunction with Tufts University in 2003.<sup>1</sup> While this chapter is not about identifying broad trends, or seeking representativity, I draw on existing data sets (of which there are very few) to verify whether my respondents' experiences were typical of the experiences of migrant women in general, or whether they were peculiar to the sample.

While sympathetic to quantitative approaches, I agree with many of the critiques made by feminist researchers. Not only do statistics tend to paint one-dimensional characters without any depth or meaning of their own (except that which the numbers or the researcher attaches), it elevates scientific objectified knowledge over other forms of knowing. Knowledge that is subjective or intuitive and considered to lack a 'scientific' basis may then be dismissed as false or untrustworthy (Magubane 2004). By using in-depth interviews and interpretive methods, this chapter attempts to better reflect the perceptions of my respondents, while explicitly recognising my contribution – as a migrant woman – in shaping the analysis and knowledge production. Firstly, it seeks to

explain women's movement on the continent by going beyond the rationalist individualistic models that reduce women to economic actors. Secondly, by foregrounding their narratives of their own experiences as migrant women, it aims to ground our knowledge in their lived experiences, helping to fill a gap in our understanding of population movements on the African continent.

Much of the data presented in this chapter are drawn from interview material collected in Johannesburg over 21 months with women migrants from African countries, including Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Congo Brazzaville, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. I identified respondents using a snowball method, with one person leading to other potential interviewees. This technique has some limitations, as it may result in the bias of some migrant networks over others (see Jacobsen & Landau 2003). The case study area is also limited to the suburbs of Berea, Yeoville, Hillbrow, and inner-city Johannesburg, which were chosen because they have a high density of migrants.

In designing the interview structure, I sought to avoid betraying my preconceived ideas about migrant women's marginalisation. This reflects Geiger's suggestion that 'marginality cannot be assumed, nor will questions that predict the marginality of the person to whom they are put yield particularly interesting insights into the self-perceptions or life of the oral historian' (1990: 170). In conducting the interviews, the only structure I imposed was that women narrate their journeys through windows that framed different stages of the migration process: the pre-migration stage, the transition stage, and the post-migration stage. Working together with a Congolese, French-speaking, male research assistant, we interviewed many of the women two or three times to allow them time to narrate their experiences at these different stages, which revealed greater detail and nuance in their stories and also helped to develop relationships of trust.

The use of interviews provided a platform to validate women's subjective experiences, elevate their voices, and narrate their subjective interpretations of their journeys (see Stanley & Wise 1983). As Magubane notes, narratives are 'often dismissed as invalid sources of academic knowledge' but, by using them, we directly challenge neutral, objective social science which tends 'to reproduce "black" and "female" as devoid of reason and therefore substandard and subhuman' (2004: 2).

Reflecting on the interviews, I realise that my attempt to 'organise' the women's journeys into what I thought were discrete rational stages did not have the desired effect. None of the women stuck purely to these frames, and often, discussions around how they negotiated life in Johannesburg referred to elements of their journey to the city. Similarly, conversations about how they discussed the move with their families often wound up revealing how they negotiated with the police or Home Affairs officials in Johannesburg. My unsuccessful attempts to 'order' these experiences in a linear sequence highlighted the disjunctions and interrelations that many women see in their own experiences.



Many migrant women pave the way for younger generations, rising above their circumstances to transform their living conditions.

My positionality, the relationship and dynamics between the interviewer and researcher undoubtedly influence the information that the respondent chooses to reveal or not reveal. Although I am a woman migrant from Kenya, issues such as class differences and language affect how respondents shape their answers. In working with women migrants, I became increasingly self-conscious about my relationship to them. One of the reasons I embarked on this research was to give voice to women migrants, who have no platform in South Africa's current political milieu. However, as I embarked on what I thought was a 'worthy' cause, I realised my own arrogance and misperception. That I thought I could make 'invisible' women visible and give the voiceless a 'voice' implied that I had power where they had none. The women that I interacted with are more complex than the 'simple folk' that I had thought them to be. I realised that stereotyping them as powerless was very problematic because they embodied a fuller, richer even paradoxical character – they were human beings.

Recognising the ethical questions raised by interviewing women without immigration documents, I have worked to ensure that I preserve the anonymity of my respondents in a way that does not make them vulnerable to arrest or deportation.

## Egoli: city of gold

Johannesburg is not new to immigrants; it is built on the sweat and struggle of migrant men and later women who, since the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in 1886, have flocked in their thousands into the region to live and explore the social and economic opportunities (see Bonner 1990; Bonner & Segal 1998; Hellman 1948; Walker 1990). In a sense, the new wave of migration in the early 1990s is a continuation of the phenomenon that Johannesburg has epitomised – as the city of gold, perceived as holding promise and opportunity for those brave enough to venture into the city.

Since the early 1990s, particularly after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the country has experienced a large influx of foreign migrants from Africa. Although African migrants are not new to South Africa, the influx of migrants from beyond southern Africa is a new phenomenon. In South Africa, existing data show that the extent of migration from the rest of the continent has increased since 1996. Census statistics show that in 1996, 4.8 per cent of the population in Gauteng province (where Pretoria and Johannesburg are located) was not born in South Africa. In 2001, the immigrant population had grown to 5.4 per cent. Johannesburg alone had seen a 57 per cent increase of migrants from the continent and the rest of the world, from approximately 66 205 to 102 326 between 1996 and 2001 (Peberdy et al. 2004).

But as migration scholars point out, much of the migration on the continent occurs outside state-regulated frameworks, making migrants bureaucratically invisible and almost impossible to trace or capture in data (Adepoju 1995; Zlotnik 2003). Thus, while these data provide some indication of the increasing flows of migrants, we cannot rely solely on them to understand the magnitude or nature of population movements. A significant proportion of the movement across borders into South Africa is not registered in official statistics, either because long tracts of frontier areas are difficult to police, or because of corruption at border posts. It is therefore impossible to make definitive conclusions about the size and scale of migration in the country (Crush & Williams 2001).

Despite these flaws in existing data, they do show a significant increase in the flow of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa since 1990, beyond the traditional patterns of movement of labour migrants from southern African countries (see Stats SA 2005, nd). These findings are consistent with international trends, which show that at least 10 per cent of the world's global international migration occurs within Africa, and between the continent's cities (UNDESA 2004). Several factors explain this movement to South Africa, with one of the most significant being that after 1990, many Africans on the continent were able to travel to South Africa as their governments lifted the travel boycott placed during apartheid. Also, increasing political and social turmoil on the continent in countries like Rwanda, Sudan, Somali, Nigeria, the DRC, Zaire, and Burundi triggered the movement of people to South Africa, which migrants perceived as relatively peaceful. A growing economic crisis on the continent also attracted many seeking wealth and economic opportunities in a country perceived as being one of the wealthiest on the continent.

From my side, it was welcomed [move to SA] given that it was my wish to leave Lubumbashi in order to come to South Africa to continue my studies. I was also happy to discover other African countries and the culture of other people. As you know yourself, in DRC, people have a good image of South Africa because they consider it like a place where there are a lot of opportunities, where people can make money and send it back home. It was the same for my family where my relatives, including myself, seemed to be happy because they know that I could become the 'bread giver' to them. (24-year-old Congolese [DRC] woman)

This influx has prompted prominent political figures to comment on the 'floods' of immigrants crossing the country's borders, and the strain this inevitably puts on social delivery. The former Minister of Home Affairs, whose portfolio immigration falls under, stated in 1994 that, 'If South Africans are going to compete for scarce resources with the millions of aliens that are pouring into South Africa, then we can bid goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme.' (cited in Palmary 2002: 4) Similarly, in his 2003 budget speech, Johannesburg's mayor, Amos Masondo, claimed that 'Johannesburg has become a magnet for people from other provinces, the African continent, and indeed the four corners of the world...While migrancy contributes to the rich tapestry of the cosmopolitan city, it also places a severe strain on employment levels, housing and public services' (Masondo 2004: 2).

Upon arrival, many migrants (men and women) find that the opportunities they expected are far scarcer than imagined. Living conditions are often harsh, business and economic opportunities limited, with few households able to make ends meet. Research conducted in the inner city often reveals that migrants live in conditions far worse than those in their home countries (see Morris 2000). Accommodation is often in shared, overcrowded, and poorly maintained flats. Many lack electricity or water, in contravention of local government safety and health by-laws. Similarly, business or work opportunities are hard to come by.

I came to South Africa to look for protection, particularly for my children. I was hoping that the South African government and the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] could give me the opportunity to live free and happy with my family. Since my family and I are not living freely and happily in Johannesburg, I cannot say that this city has offered to me some opportunities...I can say that I am living in this city or country only because my family and I do not have enough money – otherwise we could leave South Africa in order to go to another country where we could receive very good protection. (48-year-old Congolese [DRC] woman)

The Wits–Tufts survey indicates that few migrants have formal employment. Of the foreign migrants interviewed 39.2 per cent said that they are unemployed, 27.9 per cent are self-employed and run small businesses and income-generation projects.<sup>2</sup> As migrants are often undocumented, they are unable to secure formal sector employment

even though they are often relatively well qualified (Landau & Jacobsen 2004; Morris & Bouillon 2001; Reitzes 1997). The Wits–Tufts survey shows that 54.2 per cent of migrants have completed secondary school education, while 18 per cent have a tertiary degree or diploma. Many are involved in informal businesses such as selling vegetables, clothes and other goods on pavements or at municipal markets. Others run small businesses such as welding, hairdressing, tailoring and retailing shops. Even where these initiatives have managed to support families, revenue streams are threatened because of the precarious status of informal small businesses. Migrants are vulnerable to exploitation from landlords, employers, and the police and often experience xenophobia (Klusener 2000; Reitzes 1997; *Sunday Times* 12.11.2000).

All migrants, particularly undocumented ones, are vulnerable to harassment and exploitation from police, government officials and the intermediaries or ‘contacts’ that ‘arrange’ documents. However, areas of vulnerability between men and women differ. The Wits–Tufts survey shows that men are more likely to be stopped by the police than women. However, women are vulnerable not only outside but also in the home. Many enter abusive, dependent relationships in order to access basic material goods such as food, shelter and clothing. One interviewee from Tanzania said:

Whenever my boyfriend is frustrated, he comes home and beats me...it is not his fault, South Africa is not easy. I would like to leave him especially when he does this to me, but I have nowhere to go, no one to take care of me... (Tanzanian woman)

Women are also more prone to physical harassment on the street and even rape. This is, of course, a risk facing all women, migrants and citizens. One of the major differences is that undocumented migrants often feel that they cannot go to the police because they are undocumented. A Nigerian respondent, who entered into a ‘business marriage’ with a South African in order to get permanent residency, remarked on how fearful she became when the man insisted that they ‘formalise’ their marriage:

He kept following me wanting me to have sex with him because we were now married. I got so scared because he wouldn’t leave me alone, but what could I do? I could not go to the police because what I had done was illegal. He kept on telling me that he would get me deported if I didn’t sleep with him. I have a husband and children back home, how can I explain this betrayal to them? (Nigerian woman)

One of the Congolese women interviewed had a similar experience:

Here, I am nobody. I hide from the police, I hide from the South African government, I hide from my government at home. Sometimes I even hide from my own countrymen...you see, this is how I survive. (Congolese woman)

The response from this woman on her identity and relationship to others highlights her

conscious strategy to be invisible. Ironically, while being invisible may provide some protection, it also enhances migrants' susceptibility to crime without any recourse to the law, and stifles their political voice. A similar experience of fear and the use of invisibility as a strategy are shared by another Congolese woman:

My visa expired after one month and I spent six months without a permit. I could not even walk on the street, fearing the cops until my sister managed to get an asylum-seeker permit for me. She was helped by a Congolese man who worked in the Department of Home Affairs after giving him 200 rands. (Congolese woman)

In addition to the physical danger, the lives of migrant women (and men) are also influenced by disruptions to the support networks that they had established at home. Some of the women interviewed had left their family members and friends, who they relied on for support. Yet another Congolese woman remarked:

My father is dead from the war. I am 18 and I have to take care of my mother and my eight brothers and sisters. I do not have money to buy food for them, every day I struggle to sell clothes, but the money is not enough. Sometimes I go hungry so that the little ones can eat.

And another Congolese woman lamented, 'Sometimes there is no money for food, with only money for bread. Meat is a luxury, what will my children eat?'

Survival is made even more difficult by the precarious nature of the informal sector. Informal sector traders are susceptible to getting their goods confiscated and/or stolen. Incomes generated from the business are often unable to make ends meet. The women migrants we interviewed felt very vulnerable on the streets and at the market stalls. Although this is a problem that is faced by all women, it is likely to be more pronounced in the case of migrants because many have no access to bank accounts, cannot speak a South African language, and are targeted by criminals because they know that foreigners are unlikely to report them to the police. A respondent from Tanzania, with a Hillbrow street stall, says:

This place is very dangerous; I just stay there for bread. I am telling you that you can never know when those 'tsotsis' [gangsters] can come and rob your money and other stuff. They took all the stuff that I had carried as well as all my money the other day. I couldn't intervene and nobody could come to my rescue. This is a very dangerous place my sister. (Tanzanian woman, 2004)

Migrant women face many forms of patriarchal oppression and economic marginalisation in Johannesburg. In order to combat this, many adopt survival strategies that are illegal/extra-legal and which may further compromise their physical security. While migrating may help them escape the patriarchy of their former communities, they enter relationships with, among others, pimps, police, and bureaucrats in order to secure

their economic and legal situations. These relationships not only continue to undermine their ability to assert an individual identity, but their illegality often results in keeping women ‘underground’ where their voices remain stifled. In a country like South Africa, which is publicly committed to establishing the rule of law and protecting the rights of women, the question of migration therefore raises critical political questions. Since migration into South Africa is unlikely to stop, the country’s policies of regional integration have *de facto* encouraged migration from throughout the continent. Understanding the experiences of women migrants provides an important foundation for informed gendered policy interventions that may promote the rights and prosperity of migrants and host populations.

Studies investigating how women narrate their traumatic pasts show their tendency to use daily events of struggle around shelter, hunger, loneliness, betrayal, security and love to make sense of their past experiences. Women’s sense-making frames are codified through their feelings and through seemingly quotidian events (Motsemme 2003). How migrant women narrate their experiences is no different – their stories reveal their feelings of loneliness, fear, or excitement as they journey through their daily activities. A woman from the DRC tells of how she felt when she arrived in Lusaka from Lubumbashi:

I was *alone* and the cost of the travel was high, compared to the amount of money that I got...I met a Congolese businessman who advised me to hide my passport before getting into South Africa and declare myself an asylum seeker at the border as I did not have enough money because, according to him, South African immigration officers do not allow foreigners who lack money to get into their country. I was *scared* because of what the businessman told me. I hid my passport when I got to the border and informed the immigration officers that I lost it. Unfortunately things did not work as I was thinking because nobody *trusted* me until I decided to show it to them after telling them that I found it in my stuff. (Woman from DRC, emphasis added)

On arrival in Johannesburg, this woman remembers how excited and surprised she was to see ‘such a well-built country in Africa’. Migrant women’s narrations are sprinkled with stories of fear, security, survival, loneliness and so on. But these stories are not just about women’s private lives; narrations of day-to-day experiences allow us to understand broader political struggles. Indeed, feminists have often contested the (false) private/public dichotomies that relegate women to the private apolitical home charged with emotions, irrationality, and sentiments, while the male is imbued with rationality, outward looking, political, objective qualities more suited to overseeing the public. If, as the feminist movement’s slogan proposes, ‘the personal is political’, what we learn from women migrants’ narratives – of hunger, loneliness, fear, insecurity, and betrayal – mirrors a broader political context. Women’s everyday experiences become entry points for understanding the nature of the public, and using their words, we can begin to sketch an identikit of the character of the state – both sending and host. Women surface

issues around the inhumanity of the state and the character of citizenship of migrant women in Johannesburg. What happens to a woman whose life is governed by loneliness, fear, and hunger? What do citizenship and rights mean under these conditions? These questions raise important issues around the nature of the political space in areas where migrants live and there is a need to explore these issues in greater depth in future research.

## **Moving beyond an economic analysis: women's reasons for migrating to Johannesburg**

Migrant women in inner-city Johannesburg face an intersection of vulnerabilities that distinguish their situation from that of other women, or male migrants. Their existence and choices in Johannesburg are characterised by membership in two groups: women and migrants. One of the questions that women's migration to Johannesburg begs is: why, despite their difficult experiences, do they continue to move or continue to stay? As the previous section shows, women's movement occurs in the face of significant legal obstacles. Such movements may also entail considerable material, emotional and sometimes physical costs. Further, the material rewards in Johannesburg are not guaranteed, and many struggle to make a decent living wage. The question as to why women move to Johannesburg is, therefore, not easily answered by an economic rationale. We can also not explain their presence in Johannesburg solely as a result of processes beyond their control, whether economic or coercive. Using women's voices this section attempts to illustrate the nature and character of women migrants – the reasons for the decisions and choices they make to migrate. In doing this, I am able to provide a gendered analysis of the rationale and consequences of migration. It also illustrates important shifts in gender relations and socio-economic relationships resulting from the process. Women are repositioning themselves, both in the family and in their communities, in ways that challenge traditional notions of their subordinate socio-economic status in their communities and families.

Structuralist theories explain mobility with reference to inequalities in wealth, economic opportunities or access to other material benefits. Without denying the importance of material factors, some women's narratives reveal more heterogeneous motivating factors, including a desire for status and self-improvement. The following excerpts reveal such motivations:

I move in order to learn. There are many women of my age in my country who do not know what is happening in Africa or out of my country. I would like to discover the world, interact with different people in the world. I don't only consider my experience in this country in a wrong way because, as a migrant woman, I learned how to become a mother without my family. During my pregnancy I am the only one who take care of myself, even after giving birth;

while in my culture when a woman is pregnant she cannot work; but in South Africa I do not have someone to help me, the cultural rules cannot be observed, simply because of reality that I face here. (Cameroonian woman, 2005)

I came to South Africa on 4 September 2000 under the request of one of my big sisters who, after losing our father in Lubumbashi, asked me to join her in South Africa because life became very hard for my mother, brothers, sisters, and myself as we did not have someone who could take care of us...From my side, it [the decision to migrate] was welcomed given that it was my wish to leave Lubumbashi in order to come to South Africa. I was also happy to discover other African countries and the culture of other people. (Congolese [DRC] woman, 2005)

The yearning to travel and learn about new cultures and new places is clearly present in the narratives of younger women. Both these women are under 30 years of age and may represent a curiosity to travel that exists among younger women. Indeed, notwithstanding the challenges faced by the Cameroonian woman – who is in a foreign country without her family network – travelling fulfils a need to learn that outweighs the obstacles she faces being away from her family. These accounts resonate with Bauman's (1998) discussion of the longing to travel in an era in which mobility is constrained for the world's poor. Even when travel does not result in a significant material pay-off, their ability to transcend borders claims a status more typically ascribed to a globetrotting elite. Literature on globalisation has tended to focus on the mobility of highly skilled and materially advantaged populations, and while more evidence is needed, this research shows that some young African women, from relatively poor backgrounds, also travel in order to experience other worlds. As Agustin's research of women from developing countries in Europe shows, '...women also want to travel. Exposed to media images that depict travel as essential to education, pleasure and worldliness, people in poor as well as rich countries want to see famous places, experience a little glamour, be admired, meet new people, and marry' (2005: 100). While there are often economic motives for travelling, women's desires to travel are not confined to gaining material rewards. Indeed, they are taking part in a global process that many see linked only to a global elite.

As discussed earlier, much of the literature indicates that women are secondary participants (if they participate at all) in migration decisions. However, this research reveals that women are making their own decisions to migrate, and they are moving on their own. The Wits–Tufts survey shows that 58.6 per cent of women travelled from their country of origin without any other family members. Only about a third (34.7 per cent) said that they left with a spouse, and a similar number with their children. Not only are more women moving on their own, interviews reveal that even when moving with a spouse or other family member, women participate as equals in the decision-making process. Three of our respondents said that they made the decision to migrate

with their spouse. Notwithstanding the instability this has on a family, the decision is part of a household survival strategy. The following stories illustrate this:

In 1997, Anna and her husband sat down to make a decision that would have lasting consequences on their lives. They were newly married, with two children and Tanzania's economy was not doing well. He was a barber in Arusha, and she cared for the children and looked after the household. If their dreams to raise their family were to be realised, one of them would have to move to another city to try and make money to support their family. 'In the end my husband advised me to go and live in Johannesburg, he had heard good things about the place.' Anna and her husband decided that if Johannesburg worked out, he and the children could leave Tanzania and join her. In the meantime, it was important that they keep both bases; they had the security of keeping the links in Tanzania in case Johannesburg did not turn out to be what they expected. (Kihato 2004: 267)

A Nigerian had this to share about her decision to come to South Africa:

I came to South Africa in September 2002. My husband and I took the decision together some time in June because I wanted to continue my PhD studies in London. I have three children back home but my husband agreed to take care of them until I finish my studies. We thought it would be better for us if I had a PhD and earned more money. (Nigerian migrant, 2005)

Similarly, a Zambian respondent shares how she decided to leave Lusaka for Johannesburg:

When I decided to leave Zambia in order to come to South Africa, I was employed in Lusaka as a sales representative and cashier in an organisation called Development Aid for People to People...In Lusaka I was staying to one of my sisters' place. When I decided to come to South Africa, I consulted her and another big sister of mine who is also married in Lusaka. Both of them supported my project and were not afraid because I had another sister here in Johannesburg. She is a single mother with five kids and works at Johannesburg Hospital as a nurse. I informed also my parents who live in Kitwe and their reaction was positive given that they knew that I would be in good hands. I sponsored my journey alone because as an employee, I had money. (Zambian woman, 2005)

Given her education and relative affluence, it is not particularly surprising that the Nigerian respondent played a central role in making the decision to migrate. The Tanzanian's response, however, illustrates that such influence spans class differences. Although the data are inconclusive, women's influence in migration decision-making may reflect the heightened role they now play in generating family income. In other instances the promise of women's productive labour in South Africa is likely to act as a mechanism through which they can assert more influence in household decision-making. The

increasing mobility of women is transforming traditional African family systems, not only because women's ability to earn an income is giving them more decision-making powers in the home, but also because they can escape familial patriarchies and create new identities.

For this 47-year-old Zimbabwean woman, moving to Johannesburg was a means to escape the cruelty of her ex-husband and the patriarchal systems that stereotype and sometimes ostracise divorced women, who are often perceived as 'bad women' who are unable to keep a husband. It was also a means of creating a new identity and a prosperous space for her and her family.

I was living in Zimbabwe with my kids and their father. In 1987, I decided to leave my husband because I was tired of the way he used to treat me. Staying to Zimbabwe after divorcing with him could generate a lot trouble in my life. That is why I decided to come to South Africa. That is why, without consulting anybody (except my kids) I decided to come to South Africa to join my uncle who was working in Rosebank as a domestic worker. My travel was sponsored by myself and I did not ask anybody to help me because some people could go and inform my former husband. I did everything as quickly as possible in order to leave Zimbabwe; I did not even think about applying for a passport...As I told you, my purpose was to abandon definitely my former husband. I wanted also to experiment life in another country, especially in South Africa because I had a very good picture of Johannesburg in my mind given that I used to receive from my uncle some good news on Johannesburg, particularly about the economic opportunities that this city offered to people at that time. I was convinced that I could make a lot of money and improve my family's standard of life.  
(Zimbabwean woman)

The breakdown of patriarchal control mechanisms that would have kept women anchored to a male authority figure (husband, father, priest, chief) opens opportunities for women to make autonomous decisions to migrate. In many instances, the breakdown of control mechanisms is linked to men's inability to materially provide for their families. The withdrawal of this support without compensatory support for women in their communities also provides an incentive to move. My research indicates that, increasingly, single women are making independent decisions to migrate. The interview with this woman from Cameroon illustrates this:

I came to South Africa in December 2002 and nobody was involved in my decision to leave Cameroon, given that I was a single woman and was already working as a nurse in a public hospital, and I was not living together with my family. I was influenced by some of my friends' experiences overseas and here in South Africa. Most of them are doctors or nurses; they used to send a lot of money back home to their family's members and relatives. When they went back home for holidays they used to drive good cars and sleep in beautiful houses.

They used also to tell me that there were a lot of opportunities overseas and in South Africa. That is why I decided to leave my home country in order to look for a better life. My first destination was not South Africa but England. South Africa was just a transit for me. (Cameroonian woman, 2005)

This research also reveals an unexpected dimension of women's economic participation: that in many instances they have similar economic profiles to men and in others are more likely to be entrepreneurial. According to the Wits–Tufts survey, almost all foreign migrants – men or women – are equally likely to be involved in petty trading and hawking when they first arrive in South Africa. Similarly, when asked what kind of work they would like to do, an almost equal number of men (26.4 per cent) and women (25.8 per cent) said that they would like to own their own businesses. However, women are far less likely to have accessed formal or regularly paid jobs than men. Possibly because of this, this research shows that women are just as entrepreneurial as their male counterparts and just as likely to be in the informal economy. In fact, a study conducted by the South African Migration Project in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Mozambique in 1997 showed that women are more likely to be entrepreneurial and resourceful and to dominate informal sector and cross-border trading than their male counterparts (Dodson 1998). This counters beliefs that there is a differentiation in the economic activities that men and women are involved in, with men involved in economic activities that 'matter' while women participate in domestic activities.

Finally, this chapter questions the usefulness of categorisations of vulnerability and victimhood on the one hand, and agency on the other, in understanding migrant women. Much of the migration literature labels women either as victims or as heroines without acknowledging that women can embody both identities and can enact stereotypes of their vulnerability to manipulate situations to their advantage. My research shows that victimhood and agency are not mutually exclusive categories – these distinctions collapse and become intertwined when we listen to women's narratives.

In spite of experiencing very difficult situations in Johannesburg, few migrant women accept victim identities. Rather, they use words like 'I struggle', 'it is tough here', almost always accompanied with a positive qualifier like 'I/we survive', 'it is all right for me', 'it is better than going home'. Even where the woman is resigned, she still does not see herself as a victim, 'God has given us, so he will take – it happens everywhere.' My research found that many – even those in 'exploitative' relationships – were able to exercise some choice. In a number of instances, women will enter into relationships with an understanding of the consequences. More importantly, they sometimes exploit abusive/disempowering relationships to their advantage. This is not to deny women's vulnerability, but to recognise that they are not passive objects that others exploit at will. Because of the moral uproar around trafficking, prostitution and coerced labour, even those migrant women who make the choice to be sex workers in a foreign country are considered 'victims'. Being labelled a victim analytically alienates women from their agency in ways that perpetuate images of disempowerment. By remaining within this

paradigm, we fail to see how women strategically exploit relationships in order to get what they want or how relationships that are externally coded as exploitative to women are subjectively construed by them as mutually beneficial.

Women's rejection of a victim identity is evident in the way many in the sample responded to a question that asked them to compare whether they thought that male migrants suffered more than female migrants. Confounding widely held perceptions, most women migrants thought they suffered less than their male counterparts. A Zambian respondent's account is illustrative in this regard:

According to me, men suffer more than women in Johannesburg, but they have certain common difficulties, particularly regarding the job opportunity. Both men and women find job difficulty. The most dangerous problem facing women is that we are exposed to men's sexual violence because there are a lot of cases of rape among foreigners' communities. But myself, I never have been victim of such thing. (Zambian woman, 2004)

These women's responses to the question about whether the life of a woman migrant is more difficult than that of a male migrant revealed a similar sense of empowerment:

Being a woman is different from being a man. As a woman, if I do not have money or a relative in Johannesburg, men can help me. This is not the case for men migrants. Life seems to be harder for men than for women, particularly for married men. (Ugandan woman, 2005)

People are making different experiences in this country. But, according to me, there are some similarities between my experience and what a man may experience. With the lack of a job for instance, this is a common situation for men and women. Maybe men are suffering more than women because they are the ones who are supposed to take care of their families. I believe that the situation of migrants in the city of Johannesburg needs an improvement and this is the concern of the local government, which has the responsibility of making people happy. (Zambian woman, 2005)

Even those women who admitted that their lives were difficult in Johannesburg did not assume that the lives of male migrants were better than their own:

According to me, life is not the same for everybody. It depends one person to another. With regard to my own experience, I think that, as a widow, my task is very hard. I do everything myself for my family and I receive nothing from the South African Department of Home Affairs and the UNHCR, which are supposed to take care of asylum seekers. (Woman from DRC, 2005)

These narratives illustrate that women reject labels that portray them as victims. While victim narratives are often opposed by feminists because of their tendency to

dehumanise women, studies that try to counter dominant portrayals of women's victimhood fall into the same trap of dehumanising, 'disempowering and disenabling' them (Utas 2005: 407). As Patricia Connell states, 'woman's victim status creates a framework for others to know her not as a person but as a victim, someone to whom violence is done' (cf. Utas 2005: 407). But, she rightly concedes that 'while it is a sound argument that all steps must be taken to empower the abused woman, it is crucial that in this exercise, a jaundiced or incorrect picture not be painted' (cf. Utas 2005: 407). In my own research with migrant women, I confronted the moral dilemma of wanting to reject portrayals of these women as victims – a label that they themselves rejected – but also not wanting to assign 'too much' agency to a group that was certainly socially and politically marginalised. In addition to objectifying women, over-inscribing agency in women's actions allows actors like the state and the broader community to abdicate responsibility for the way in which women are treated in their communities. And, while women do have mechanisms for navigating difficult social situations, their well-being should not be just an individual responsibility, but a communal one as well.

For researchers working with women there is a need to situate them in a broader socio-political context, while simultaneously demonstrating their agency. Wendell's (1990) framework for understanding women's agency within the context of oppression is instructive here. She suggests the use of four perspectives – the oppressor, victim, responsible actor, observer/philosopher – to help us understand agency within oppressive circumstances. The latter two standpoints allow us to recognise the marginality of women in socio-political contexts as well as to identify their ability to act even within a difficult context.

While it is true that even under the most difficult circumstances migrant women do have some agency, portraying them as heroines has the same dehumanising and objectifying effect as portraying them as victims. As an African woman who has experienced and seen the oppressive conditions under which our mothers, grandmothers, carers and aunts have lived, I am faced with the dilemma of wanting to portray them as I saw them; women who paved the way for younger generations, and who often rose above their circumstances to transform their living conditions. But I also witnessed their resignation, at times when they had lost their fight and had been forced into submission. To assign agency in every woman's actions is to negate their continued struggles to overcome repressive conditions which, in many cases, continue to limit their ability for self-actualisation (Utas 2005). Agency is further complicated by what Utas calls 'victimcy', women's self-presentation as victims as a strategy for navigating difficult social situations. Utas explains that:

the term victimcy is proposed to describe the agency of self-staging as victim of war and explore how it is deployed as one tactic – amongst others – in one young Liberian woman's 'social navigation' of war zones. Victimcy is thus revealed as a form of self-representation by which a certain form of tactic agency is effectively

exercised under the trying, uncertain and disempowering circumstances that confront actors in warscapes. (2005: 403)

This Zimbabwean woman's self-portrayal as a mad, dumb and mute woman in order to cross the South African border to some extent illustrates how women manipulate common stereotypes of themselves to steer through difficult situations:

Yes, it was not easy to come to South Africa at that time. I tried twice to get into South Africa; for the first time, I was arrested in Mafikeng by the police and I was even repatriated to my country. For the second time, I was helped by one of my sisters-in-law, my cousin's wife, who is a South African citizen living in Zimbabwe at that time with her husband. She was coming to South Africa for a visit; I took the advantage in order to ask her to help me to get into South Africa. When we arrived at the South African border she presented me as her sister and told the immigration officers that I was a dumb and I never spoke to people; I was just quiet and looked at people like a mad woman because if I did not react like that my sister-in-law and I could be arrested. (Zimbabwean woman)

If victimhood and passivity can be used to portray agency, then the conceptual boundaries of these terms need to be expanded to accommodate situations in which women enact vulnerability, dumbness, stupidity, and use this *power* to get their way. Understanding these strategies can only be done through research that brings women's daily relational experiences to the surface. Indeed, if we *listen* to what women are telling us we realise that the use of victimcy as a strategy is not uncommon. Women will use their tears (Raimundo pers. comm.) or silence (see Motsemme 2004) to play on stereotypes of vulnerability and passivity to manipulate situations to their advantage, a phenomenon described elsewhere by Leone de Kock (1996) as 'subversive subservience'. Notions of agency and victimhood/passivity are complexly intertwined. Further, if agency is not permanent or immutable, if migrant women sometimes display it and sometimes do not, and if, indeed, passivity or victimhood can sometimes be interpreted as agency, then oppositional notions of women's passivity/victimhood in the migration process, on the one hand, or their agency, on the other, need to be challenged and collapsed. Women's passivity, just like their agency, is contingent upon the specific social circumstances they find themselves in (Utas 2005). When we begin to see migrant women not just as victims, but as victors as well, not always invisible but also visible, not always voiceless but also with voice, then we begin to understand broader patterns of migration; how movement is shaped, what influences it and how it changes family structures and socio-economic relationships.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide an alternative way of seeing and understanding migrant women and their experiences in the migration process. It challenges existing migration literature which treats migrant women as passive participants in the migration process. Historical treatments of migration have tended to use economicistic models that explain migration through a material cost-and-benefit analysis, which largely ignores women's labour in domestic and informal economic spheres. Similarly, women's recent increased visibility in migration literature has tended to concentrate on their victimisation, which perpetuates representations of them as passive participants in the migration process. Even literature that seeks to move beyond these stereotypes falls back into the trap of labelling migrant women as prostitutes, liquor traders, and victims of traditional patriarchal structures and colonial oppression. Reacting to these misperceptions of women is new literature that seeks to liberate migrant women from their perceived victimhood, by highlighting their agency in the migration process. But by celebrating women's agency, this literature ignores the structural conditions that continue to oppress women even as they display agency. Indeed, it fails to adequately capture migrant women's everyday life experiences, which are too complex to fit neatly into binary constructed categories of 'victims' or 'victors'. This chapter has revealed that women have agency in the migration process; they actively participate in making decisions to move, enter relationships that have strategic benefit and, in some cases, consider themselves less vulnerable than men. But it also illustrates that migrant women continue to live under oppressive patriarchal and political conditions in which political discourses continue to exclude them from participating in the society which hosts them. Scholarly analyses of migrant women need to unpack these complexities of everyday life and break down the conceptual frameworks that provide only either/or options. Migrant women's own voices illustrate that they cannot be placed in static categories. Doing this not only misrepresents who they are, but it also limits our understanding of the nature and character of migration on the continent.

### NOTES

- 1 This survey questioned 737 respondents in central Johannesburg, including 345 foreigners and 392 South Africans. The survey was conducted in Berea, Bertrams, Bezuidenhout valley, Fordburg, Mayfair, Rosettenville and Yeoville among migrant communities from Angola, Burundi, Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia and South Africa. I am grateful to the programme for providing me with permission to use their data. For more information on the survey, see Jacobsen and Landau (2003).
- 2 Interestingly, slightly more South Africans were unemployed than non-South Africans, and South Africans are much less likely to run their own business than foreign migrants. Only 6.2 per cent of South Africans were self-employed compared to 27.2 per cent of the non-South African sample population. Though interesting, these disparities are not the focus of this chapter. Also, foreigners were more likely to hire South Africans than vice versa.

## REFERENCES

- Abusharaf RM (2001) Migration with a feminine face: Breaking the cultural mold. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Spring: 1–18. Available at <[www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi2501/is\\_2\\_23/ai\\_77384491/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi2501/is_2_23/ai_77384491/print)>. Accessed on 22 February 2005.
- Adepoju A (1995) Migration in Africa. In J Baker & TA Aina (Eds) *The migration experience in Africa*. Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Adepoju A (2004) Trends in international migration in and from Africa. In DS Massey & JE Taylor (Eds) *International migration prospects and policies in a global market*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aghatise E (2004) Possible Effects of Government Proposals for Legalization of Brothels. *Violence Against Women*, 10(10): 1126–55.
- Agustin LM (2003) A migrant world of services. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 10(3): 377–96.
- Agustin LM (2005) Migrants in the mistress's house: Other voices in the 'trafficking' debate. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 12(1): 96–117.
- Andermahr S, Lovell T & Wolkowitz C (2002) *A glossary of feminist theory*. London: Arnold.
- Bauman Z (1998) *Globalisation: The human consequence*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bonner P (1990) Desirable or undesirable Basotho women? Liquor, prostitution and the migration of Basotho women to the Rand, 1920–1945. In C Walker (Ed) *Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945*. CapeTown: David Philip.
- Bonner P & Segal L (1998) *Soweto: A history*. Johannesburg: Maskew Miller Longman.
- Boyd M (2003) *Women and migration: incorporating gender into international migration theory*. In Migration Information Resource, available at <<http://www.migrationinformation.org>>. Accessed on 15 February 2005.
- Bozzoli B (with Nkotsoe M) (1991) *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, life strategy and migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Chammartin G (2001) *The feminisation of international migration*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation.
- Colsen E (1971) *The social consequences of resettlement*. Manchester: University of Manchester.
- Crush J & Williams V (2001) *Making up the numbers: Measuring "illegal immigration" to South Africa*. Migration Policy Brief No. 3. Cape Town: Southern Africa Migration Project.
- De Kock L (1996) *Civilising barbarians: Missionary narrative and African textual response*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Dodson B (1998) Women on the move: Gender and cross-border migration to South Africa. *Migration Policy Series*, 9. Cape Town: Southern African Migration Project.
- Faist T (2000) *The volume and dynamics of international migration and transnational social spaces*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Geiger S (1990) What's so feminist about women's oral history? *Journal of Women's History*, 2(1): 169–82.
- Gugler J & Ludwar-Ene G (1995) Gender and migration in Africa South of the Sahara. In J Baker & TA Aina (Eds) *The migration experience in Africa*. Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Guyer J (1981) Household and community in African studies. *African Studies Review*, 24(2/3): 87–137.
- Hellman E (1948) *Rooiyard: A sociological survey of an urban native slum yard*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Jacobsen K & Landau L (2003) The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration. *Disasters*, 27(3): 95–116.
- Kihato C (2004) 'Nepad, the city and the immigrant' *Development Update* 5(1): 267–85.
- Klusener M (2000) *Zimbabwes target of xenophobic attacks in South Africa*. CNS News.com, 23 October. Available at <<http://www.queensu.ca/samp/migrationresources/xenophobia/press/target.htm>>. Accessed on 2 February 2006.
- Landau L & Jacobsen K (2004) Refugees in the New Johannesburg. *Forced Migration Review*, 19: 44–6.
- Magubane Z (2004) Introduction. In R Mabokela & Z Magubane (Eds?) *Hear our voices: Race, gender and the status of Black South African women in the academy*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.
- Masondo M 2004. *State of the city address*. Available from: [http://www.joburg.org.za/2004/jan/jan29\\_state.stm](http://www.joburg.org.za/2004/jan/jan29_state.stm) Accessed on 15 March 2006
- Mayer P (1962) Migrancy and the study of Africans in town. *American Anthropologist*, 64: 576–92.
- Morris A (2000) *Bleakness and Light: Inner City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Morriss A & Bouillon A (Eds) (2001) *African immigration to South Africa: Francophone migration of the 1990s*. Pretoria: Protea & IFAS.
- Motsemme N (2003) Black Women's Identities. In K Ratele & N Duncan (Eds) *Social psychology: Identities and relationships*. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Motsemme N (2004) The mute always speak: on women's silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Current Sociology*, 52(5): 909–32.

- Palmary I (2002) Refugees, safety and xenophobia in South African cities: The role of local government. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. Available at <<http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papalm4.htm>> Accessed on 9 April 2004.
- Peberdy S, Crush J & Msibi N (2004) *Migrants in the city of Johannesburg: A report for the city of Johannesburg*. Johannesburg: City of Johannesburg.
- Piper N (2003) International, Regional, and Local Nongovernmental Organization Responses in Asia. *Violence Against Women*, 9(6): 723–45.
- Reitzes M (1997) *Strangers truer than fiction: the social and economic impact of migrants on the Johannesburg inner city*. Research Report no. 60. Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies.
- Sander C & Maimbo SM (2003) Migrant labour remittances in Africa: Reducing obstacles to developmental contributions. Africa regional working paper series no. 64. World Bank.
- Sjaastad LA (1962) The costs and returns of human migration. *Journal of Political Economy*, 70(1): 80–93.
- Stanley L & Wise S (1983) *Breaking out: Feminist consciousness and feminist research*. London: Routledge.
- StatsSA (Statistics South Africa) (2005) *Documented Migration 2003*. Pretoria: StatSA.
- StatsSA (nd) *Documented Migration 2001*. Pretoria: StatsSA.
- Todaro MP (1969) A model of labour migration and urban unemployment in less developed countries. *American Economic Review*, 59: 138–48.
- UNDESA (2004) Trends in Total Migrant Stock: The 2003 Revision. New York: United Nations. Available at <[www.un.org/esa/population/publications/migstock/2003Trends\\_Migstock.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/migstock/2003Trends_Migstock.pdf)>. Accessed on 27 July 2005.
- Utas M (2005) Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering; tactic agency in a young woman's social navigation of the Liberian war zone. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78(2): 403–30.
- Walker C (1990) Gender and the development of the migrant labour system c1850–1930: An overview. In C Walker (Ed) *Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945*. CapeTown: David Philip.
- Wendell S (1990) Oppression and victimisation; choice and responsibility. *Hypatia*, 5(3): 15–46.
- White L (1990) *The comforts of home: Prostitution in colonial Nairobi*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zlotnik H (1998) International migration 1965–96: An Overview. *Population and Development Review*, 24(3): 429–68.
- Zlotnik H (2003) Migrants' rights, forced migration and migration policy in Africa. Paper presented at the Conference on African Migration in Comparative Perspective. Johannesburg, 4–7 June.

## INTERVIEW

Raimundo I, researcher at the Centre for Population Studies, University of Eduardo Modlane, Maputo, Mozambique, 5 September 2005.

# Ambiguity is my middle name: A research diary

YVETTE ABRAHAMS

All this that I am now telling you, you yourself know it to be true: you are in no position to force me back: it is I who can drive you off. You are free to put it to the test. Even little children know it for the truth, for they saw me circling around your settlement, and turning away; and they also saw you seek shelter at your place. I don't say this to boast before you, but it is the truth. And to speak and act the truth is righteous and good and brings blessings.<sup>1</sup> (Heywood & Maasdorp 1995: 26)

In 1996 I was requested to write up the historiography of Sarah Bartmann, a task I had up to then always managed to avoid. In fact, even in the face of a pointed request, I found the task impossible. I began writing this diary in order to understand why this was so. This chapter deals with my relationship to the academic world of knowledge surrounding the Sarah Bartmann story. It is a quest for self-understanding and self-retrieval from the obscurities of a language not created for my benefit, a turnaround polemic against racist and sexist cultural texts which silenced me through their animosity, and a contribution towards the communal project of creating a more hospitable mental environment for African creativity. It expresses my human need to understand, come to terms with, and move on from the historiography. Finally, this chapter is an exercise in womanist methodology. Because womanism considers race and gender identity important, I have occasionally specified the race and gender identity of the scholars I discuss. In this way, racism and sexism by exclusion – that is, to work on an assumption of racial and sexual homogeneity which in practice turns out to be a mainly white, mainly male reality – can be rendered visible. This should aid the process of examining the interconnections between identity, history and historiography, the focus of this investigation.

In this chapter I also hope to lay bare my prejudices, insights, and the importance of my experiences as a Black woman writing about Sarah Bartmann to a study of her historiography.

## From the beginning, then

This diary is about my inability to be a disembodied academic dispassionately analysing some objectified specimen. My race and my gender follow me, even into my academic work. There is not, in the Sarah Bartmann historiography which has been written by white males, any symbolic role model where Black = good, woman = righteousness, or Brown = beauty. On the contrary, the quintessential experience of living my race and gender in the shadowy world which is the historiography of Sarah Bartmann has been well described by Lorraine Hansberry:

I can be coming home from eight hours on an assembly line or fourteen hours in Mrs. Halsey's kitchen. I can be all filled up that day with three hundred years of rage so that my eyes are flashing and my flesh is trembling – and the white boys in the streets, they look at me and think of sex. They look at me and that's all they think...Baby, you could be Jesus in drag – but if you're brown they're sure you're selling. (Hansberry 1969: 98)

My initial desire had been to leave my race and gender at home and be in some equitable world with other intellects. The assumption was always that, being Brown, I had to be selling, if not my body, then my credibility, or both.

I am a descendant of the Khoekhoe writing about Sarah Bartmann. My relationship to her is special. I remember reading the white man Sander Gilman's article:

Eighteenth century travelers to southern Africa, such as Francois Le Vaillant and John Barrow, had described the so-called Hottentot Apron, a hypertrophy of the labia and nymphae caused by the manipulation of the genitalia and serving as a sign of beauty among certain tribes, including the Hottentots and Bushmen. (Gilman 1986: 213)

The above was not my idea of refined intellectual intercourse, and most certainly not the search for truth I had been brought up to believe in. For white male academics, this may be an intellectual matter; indeed, at this point Gilman is making an argument about nineteenth century intellectual history. For me, this is personal. I am of these people: the 'Hottentot and Bushman' tribes which Gilman talks about.

In the rest of the article Gilman failed to demonstrate the existence of this 'apron'. He took its existence for granted, and chose never to point out that this 'apron' was a figment of the imagination.

My position does allow me certain privileged information. Until that time the mysteries of the 'Hottentot apron' had been hidden from me. For one brief moment, as I re-read those lines, I did toy with the idea of phoning my mother and aunt and asking them if they had ever seen or heard of this 'sign of beauty', but my heart quailed at the thought of that little bit of empirical research. My mother would certainly be offended, and begin to wonder audibly why she had wasted her time and money sending me to

university. My aunt would think I had lost my mind, and score points over my mother on the comparative mental stability of my cousins, less advanced academically but endlessly saner.

So I scotched the idea and got on with my work. Perhaps I should have called my mother instead; perhaps that way I would have discovered much sooner the truth that history is about identity. Historians have identities which seem to interact in strange ways with their studies. Researching Sarah Bartmann's life and talking to people about her was a process of learning for me: I would remain a Brown woman, no matter how many strings of degrees I trailed behind my name.

Unlike me, another white man liked Gilman's article because it was about science:

I would have enjoyed reading analyses not only of literary texts but also of political, scientific, and philosophical writings on the question of 'race' during the same period, since the subject we are interested in is ideology, the dividing line between fiction and non-fiction grows rather fuzzy, and it is clear that these texts had considerable influence on one another, no matter to what genre they belonged. (In this respect, Sander Gilman's essay...is the only exception.) (Todorov 1986: 377)

Enjoyment was not exactly my predominant emotion on reading Gilman's 'scientific' treatment; I have never been able to re-read it without getting angry at its racism and ignorance.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly Gilman was confronted with critiques. Nobody, however, confronted him on this central lie. Here is a white scholar who did an extended textual analysis of the article:

What, then, is the function of the images in this story? Within Gilman's shifting discourse the images can easily work as unbecoming confirmations of the critic's dubious position. They illustrate, and reconfirm, a positivistic belief in what one 'sees with one's very eyes'. Looking hovers between erotic reveling in, and scientific positing of, a particular version of 'reality', and the latter is easily put forward as an excuse for the former. Corbey thematizes that belief explicitly, thus attempting to distance himself from the fatal complicity a la Gilman. But when he reproduces and exhibits these postcards, he does so in order to use them as evidence. Evidence of what exactly? Not of the savage femininity of 'Africa' and 'Africans', but of the objectionable colonizing meaning production by the colonial. (Bal 1991: 33)

This begged the question of complicity, that is, how Gilman's culture and history produced such a man, and such a paper. 'Fatal complicity' could not be limited to one man alone. Gilman wrote in a time and place when the Khoekhoe were an unknown, savage people from an obscure corner of the earth. The thought that one day one of them would read it and say, 'Hey, where do you come on this nonsense?' probably never occurred to him.

Bal's distancing of herself from Gilman and Corbey was not, it seemed, in defence of Sarah Bartmann, nor an attack on unquestioned assumptions. It was in defence of the notion that there is somehow a 'proper' way in which the colonised can be used as text to aid colonial psychotherapy:

Postcolonial criticism can make a difference, but which difference it makes is not always clear...insight alone is not enough; we have to live our past traumas again, not looking at them from a false distance but immersing ourselves in them. (Bal 1991: 44)

I wish that Bal had spent less time reliving her past traumas and a little more time thinking of whether her actions were traumatising somebody else. Firstly, she wasn't confronting that genital lie. By not confronting it, she was practising passive acceptance. Secondly, she was recirculating that material. Her article contained no naked white men, together with false and probably libelous statements about their bodily parts. It contained only more naked women of colour, so in response to the naked women of colour in Bal's article, I felt the same anger aroused by Gilman's illustrations. The text of Bal's article may have been a postcolonial critique of the postcolonial, but the subtext was the same.

Compare Bal's critique to that of a Black man written '...in a voice characterized by an anger dangerously self-restrained' (Carby 1986: 310):

...one sometimes has the feeling that an imitation of science – conceived of as a neutral rationalist presentation of 'facts' or a rigorous cataloguing of 'instances' – is the only end. This end, lacking as it is in what might be called 'real side' referentiality and present-day political sensitivity, leads to frighteningly embarrassing moments such as Sander L. Gilman's...[article]. The only thing that can be said about this 'scientific' presentation with its simplistically contextualized illustrations and weak connectives is that it offers a fine illustration of Pratt's 'manners-and-customs' category, presenting yet again, and so dreadfully embarrassingly, a white male confessional. 'Look what we have done,' it naughtily delights, rubbing its hands and looking pruriently sidewise. (Baker 1986: 387–8)

I liked that anger. I have for long been aware that a non-racialised white feminism would end up sowing divisions in the Black community. Black men are sexist and the violent emanations of that sexism could well succeed in destroying the Black community. It made me think of the sexual politics of lynching, not to mention the sexual politics of Sarah Bartmann historiography, at least that part written by white males. Certainly Black men have a historical experience which should enable them to understand what Black women are going through. They have been subject to violent deformations of the body like we have, if not in the same manner or extent. It's about time that they begin to sort it out.

Having said that, I must go on to say that Baker did not go nearly far enough for me. Most of the time, it seemed to me as if this debate was missing the point. I mean, what

was all this ‘genital manipulation’ anyway? Here was Gilman, saying without hesitation in public that Khoekhoe women play with themselves, and nobody was contradicting the man.<sup>3</sup> My response was a very vernacular, ‘Ooh pleeeease!’ Like during 350 years of colonialism, war, measles, slavery and apartheid we had still found time, between raising families and liberating this country, to play with ourselves. Why did I find this a silly theory? Because it was not just Black, but Brown history. It was my history and Sarah Bartmann’s history. Before I could even begin to write that history, I found myself having to define my relationship to this, the silliest of theories.

Before going on, I need to explain that what you have just read is all there is in terms of a ‘Sarah Bartmann historiography’. There is a resounding silence in the texts which you will read from now on about what previous writers have said. You might find it in the endnotes and references, but the one thing which we require of any graduate student – a survey of the literature which has gone before – is missing. The reason for this may be that the text is *never* about Sarah Bartmann. It is always about something else in which she is being used as an example, or as evidence. The effect of this is that the object under discussion can never be a subject. Instead, she is presented in a timeless, unstable present in which all connections to her history and selfhood are lost. This makes it that much easier to objectify her and exploit her for whatever textual purpose is at stake. Gilman, writing at a time when at least three other contemporary authors had written about Sarah Bartmann, did not appraise any of them.

Both the unstable present and its function are revealed in this argument from Jay Gould:

Khoekhoe women do exaggerate two features of their sexual anatomy...Linnaeus was only saying that African women have a genital flap...He was also wrong because only the Khoekhoe and a few related peoples develop this feature...the *labia minora* or ‘inner lips’ of ordinary female genitalia are greatly enlarged in Khoekhoe women and may hang down three or four inches below the vagina when women stand. (Gould 1982: 22–3)

This is ostensibly an intellectual argument, this time about taxonomy. I could deal with it on that basis. I could even take it seriously enough to demand empirical evidence. Sarah Bartmann’s body is their empirical evidence. What Jay Gould is saying is not only that Khoekhoe women play with themselves, but that this is what matters about us. This is our point of entry into academic discourses.

The Khoekhoe are the native South Africans. Our history here stretches back some 25 millennia, and yet how are we brought into white male history? The answer, in my native idiom, is unprintable and yet white academic language was not only saying it, but saying it in such a way that it legitimises the speaking of the unspeakable. By now I could see that I was not taking on Gilman alone. This was about his history, his people; my history, my people and the fight, not just to take our land and make us slaves, but to determine our very identity through racial and gendered power. The ‘genital flap’ was an expression of undiluted racism and sexism. And I had become its object.

## Finding an aunt

I could never be right. Reading the white historiography of Sarah Bartmann, there was no place, and no identity, which would let me feel right about myself. I was not alone. As Kimberlé Crenshaw said, in the twilight zone of being a Black woman, the most incredible things happen:

The particular experience of black women in the dominant cultural ideology of American society can be conceptualized as intersectional. Intersectionality captures the way in which the particular location of black women in dominant American social relations is unique, and in some senses unassimilable into the discursive paradigms of gender and race domination. One commonly noted aspect of this location is that black women are in a sense doubly burdened, subject in some ways to the dominating practices of both a sexual hierarchy and a racial one. In addition to this added dimension, intersectionality also refers to ways that black women's marginalization within the dominant discourses of resistance limits the means available to relate and conceptualize our experiences as black women. (Crenshaw 1992: 271)

'Unassimilable', my symbolic selves in these texts, Khoekhoe women, were limited to one bodily part, used and abused in the 'othering' discourses on art history, taxonomy or postcolonial criticism. I was the only one in my university admitting consciousness, hurt, confusion and anger about this putative bodily part debate. It is the weirdest feeling when something in the historiography drives you to tears and most people don't seem to notice anything wrong; I thought I was the crazy one.

I began to realise that to identify myself as an intellectual was to make myself a fish out of water. Academic discourse held no place for our brains, only for our bodies. Gould only confirmed my suspicions:

[In the museum of Man] I saw a little exhibit that provided an immediate and chilling insight...in three smaller jars I saw the dissected genitalia of Third World women. I found no brains of women...[and no] male genitalia graced the collection. (Gould 1982: 20)

This liberal genuflection – the lifting of the hands and raising of eyes and moaning, 'Oh how terrible this all is!' could not release Gould's text from its terrible assumptions. What really needed to be dissected here was the fact that Gould was still the one to observe, women of colour still the ones to be observed. To be a Brown woman observing is, in the white male narratives surrounding Sarah Bartmann, a contradiction in terms. There was no place for me in this discourse. It seemed as if I was going to have to choose between identities. In the dominant white narrative, wanting to observe, to study and understand was going to also make of me a non-white.<sup>4</sup> Here, I could find no path to follow which would allow me to be simultaneously a historian and a woman of colour.

Researching the story of Sarah Bartmann within the context of the white male meta-narrative meant reversing the positions which were regarded as proper within our native narrative. In my culture, there is simply no way for me to relate to a woman almost two centuries older than me other than by treating her with extreme respect. If we had only a passing acquaintance, I would have addressed her as 'Mrs Bartmann', but by this time we were meeting on a daily basis. So, although we are not blood relatives, I should call her 'auntie' and address her at all times in the third person. This was not a problem for me, since I am old-fashioned about manners. In the home I began to talk about 'auntie Sarah'.

The aunt/niece relationship is more about respect than about hierarchy, but if there was a hierarchy at all it would certainly have to go one way only. The power relation implied by auntie Sarah being observed by my observer self was all wrong. It was at this point that I chose to reject the position of intellectual that the white male historiography placed me in – an unsolvable dilemma. I simply cannot say in my native idiom, 'Have you seen that picture purporting to represent auntie Sarah's...?' It is not thinkable. At least, to even think it is to be so rude that I make myself an outcast in my own culture. So powerful is this convention that it has taken me years even to phrase my dilemma. At the time I tried to cope by using two languages. I wrote about 'Sarah Bartmann' and thought about 'auntie Sarah'.

Paranoid schizophrenia was an old coping mechanism, and one which had proved a passable defence against racism and sexism. The problem was that this time it was a coping mechanism which estranged me from the native culture which gave me strength. In the past I had coped with difficult discourses by thinking in vernacular and then carefully translating in my written work. This worked well as long as the field I was studying was one where my history had been suppressed or subverted, violent, but not sexually so. With Sarah Bartmann's story, the leering preoccupations of white male historiography operated so as to turn my own vernacular against me. A problem that I could not even begin to phrase in my language was a problem I could not solve.

I did try. It was hard to do without a linguistic habit which had served me for years. I do remember occasionally trying to translate the white male historiography. Every time I tried, there was only one native narrative tradition I could possibly begin to cast it in, that of swear words and insults.

There is another tradition, that of women talking amongst themselves, which can be very open and to the point. Yet white male concerns did not in any way translate into that. The thought of women sitting around discussing somebody's hypothetical bodily deformations is just absurd. I found myself forced to write about her solely in academic English, a position which I had already rejected.

Paranoid schizophrenia is not a good state for analytic thinking. I did reach some conclusions, though, but only through the medium of story and analogy. Past and present came together for me as I began to understand that, although some Brown women were invited in from the kitchen and allowed to sit in the lounge, served tea

even, we were being offered an uncomfortable seat. I felt like Jadine in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* in that scene where she is sitting at table with the master and mistress, making polite conversation while her uncle Sydney is serving (Morrison 1981). I was being made welcome at the academic table with auntie Sarah being served up for dinner. The seemingly benign, abstract intellectual conversation had become, in my vernacular, a discussion of an aunt's own business. For me to participate would have been the academic equivalent of passing for white.

The experience made me sick and the tidbits served for dessert did not help. Gordon cited a study from 1937 to support his contention that '*the tablier* enjoys a wide distribution in Africa' (Gordon 1992: 187). For the brief moment that I had been able to approach this purely intellectually it had been an interesting study. Gordon is that anomaly in the Sarah Bartmann discourse, a man knowledgeable in Khoekhoe history and therefore able to put those white male fantasies in as much of a historical context as anthropology will allow him. But from the point of view of my identity, he was being difficult. He could not concede that this central white male preoccupation was a fantasy. The thought that all those 'respected' scientists suffered racist and sexist delusions may have been beyond him. Patricia Hill Collins writes:

The fact that Sarah Bartmann was both African and a woman underscores the importance of gender in mentioning notions of racial purity. In this case Bartmann symbolized Blacks as a 'race'. Thus the creation of the icon applied to Black women demonstrates the notions of gender, race and sexuality were linked in overarching structures of political domination and economic exploitation.  
(Hill Collins 1990: 169)

With regard to white male sexuality, Hill Collins's description was precise. White men must have expected enough pleasure out of this display to be prepared to pay for it. Over time, these expectations were built into the symbolic system. Gordon's place in those overarching structures of political domination did not seem to allow him to undermine the wet dream it was built on. This despite his overt purpose, which was to argue that Black woman = sexual icon was not natural, but created to enable economic exploitation.

All this *tablier* discourse was, of course, there for a purpose. My feeling was that it was there to say, 'You, Yvette, are the respectable darkie, you have learned how to wash, you have learned how to use a knife and fork and converse about those other uncouth darkies in civilised language.' And if I did not want to, what was the option? In the discourse of the lounge, only to join the labia'd ones. I like dining out. But I could not eat hatred.

Hill Collins has put my dilemma in much more respectable language:

When an outsider group – in this case African-American woman – recognizes that an insider group – in this case white males – requires special privileges from larger society, a special problem arises of keeping the outsiders out and at the

same time having them acknowledge the legitimacy of this procedure. Accepting a few 'safe' outsiders addresses this legitimisation problem. One way of excluding the majority of Black women from the knowledge validation process is to permit a few Black women to acquire positions of authority in institutions that legitimate knowledge, and to encourage us to work within the taken-for-granted assumptions of Black female inferiority shared by the scholarly community and by the culture at large. (Hill Collins 1990: 204)

It was possible that there were certain taken-for-granted assumptions about my inferiority which would not perturb me. As an undergraduate I would devote the first tutorial or two of each course to convincing my tutor (white male or female alike) that I had a brain. Each course, without fail, I would devour the reading material and prepare questions which would not only probe the material but also demonstrate my intelligence. It would sometimes be tricky to find a hook to hang my questions on in the actual tutorial, but I learned to improvise. Only once this was done would I relax and breathe, secure in the knowledge that I would be treated as of average human intelligence. I hated nothing more than people taking one look at my skin colour and gender and talking down to me. Still, I can't remember this antagonism ever discouraging me from desiring to teach, research and write in the future. This public discourse about private parts was another kettle of fish altogether. The price exacted from a Black woman was too high.

## A mother's resistance

Like Brown girls are wont to do in times of trouble, I headed for my mother's house. She gave me, I think, her blessing. We cooked, ate and told stories. As I thought, there between the stove and the sink, of all the young ones who dreamed of an education, I realised I had work to do. Nourished anew by the root of my life I put myself back together again and headed for my alma mater.

The first thing I did was to take the insults seriously. I did this by tracking down white male sexual fantasies about Khoekhoe women from auntie Sarah's parents' time to after her death (the 1770s to the 1820s), a truly nasty job, but one that had to be done. I did not want to do the disproving by referring to the physical evidence; that was not the respectful thing to do. Rather, I thought, if I could discuss the history of ideas about the Khoekhoe I could show that this history had an existence unrelated to anatomical realities. I mean, Khoekhoe women did not suddenly develop physical conformations in the late eighteenth century. I was culturally unable to treat auntie Sarah as an object, so my solution was going to be to turn white male travel writers into the objects of my research. I wanted to turn the lens, to connect to a long tradition of Brown women observing white men and coming to some unflattering and mostly unprintable conclusions.

I wrote:

What did the Khoekhoe think about these obsessions? Again, it is hard to say. Certainly amongst their descendants it is considered extremely rude to mention someone's genitals. This is the more so when the genitals are those of an ancestor, and if the ancestor is female the very mention of them is considered an invitation to fight. So pervasive is this perception that if this paper were written for an audience in Mitchell's Plain, say, or the Richtersveld, a suitable title would have been 'Jou Ma se M---; or what white people have been saying about us for three hundred years.' (Abrahams 1997a: 67; cf. Hill Collins 1990)

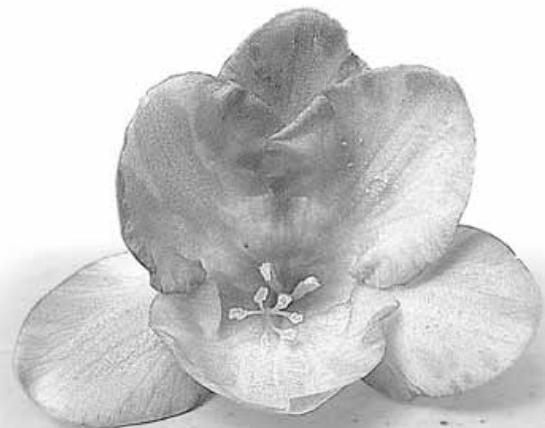
It is clear to me now that what I really wanted was to be writing for an audience of my own community; it would have made my task simpler and my paper shorter. Instead, that fight was calling me. I then went on to relate the 'apron' idea to its specific historical context.

Off paper I began to argue. I kept saying, 'Look, we do not play with ourselves until our bodily parts hang down to our knees.' One scene would have been funny if it were not so silly: I was having lunch with a white man and, although I cannot remember the conversation verbatim, there was a sort of subtext where he conceded easily that I did not. After all, I was one of the citified Khoekhoe who had given over our ancient ways. Already I was uneasy, since this was not my idea of lunchtime conversation with a comparative stranger. My luncheon companion said to me:

Well, you know, in the desert where I work it is hot and dry, and I have often seen my daughters scratch themselves down there, because the dry desert air makes them itch. Perhaps that is what the Khoekhoe women did. (pers. comm.)

I recovered, I think, enough to make a snappy comeback. After all, something had been won in this encounter; he had conceded that it was something in the past, unlike Gilman whose phrase '*serving as a sign of beauty*' to me meant that he was arguing that we were still doing it. I said:

Well, *you* know, Sarah Bartmann grew up in the Eastern Cape, an area of South Africa which has year-round rainfall. I don't see why she should have scratched



herself. We had oils, you know, and medicines – is cortisone not won from a South African plant?<sup>5</sup>

It seemed enough to get him to change the subject. Unfortunately, by this stage I had lost my appetite, a sad thing for a student getting a free lunch. My victory, if anything, was extremely limited. A fact little known about me is the fact that I spent my first years in a dry desert area of southern Africa. Although I cannot honestly remember any itching, it was still in a sense my body lying there on the table, open to all to discuss. It may be argued that his daughter's bodies were also part of the story, yet their racial identity protected them. They were not in the position of having people looking at them and thinking about hanging labia. That was when I began to feel what it must have been like to be auntie Sarah.

This is still what it means to be auntie Sarah. After 185 years, her body is still lying on the table of countless undergraduate students swotting for their courses in race and representation, literature, art history, history, anthropology, archaeology or the history of medicine. That fighting year I protested as best I could from the position of powerlessness which casual temporary teaching staff inhabit. One course in particular I remember well. By the time I was hired the course reader had already been printed. I found myself in the position of having to teach that Gilman text (which seemed destined to haunt me over two continents).

There was little I could do, but that little I did. When teaching about auntie Sarah to first-year students I pasted pictures of indigenous flowers over that infamous page of Gilman's (Gilman 1986: 217). I recommended my students to do the same, and frowned heavily on any boy who dared to leave an unpasted page open in my class.

This course was an unending struggle. The white boys I taught were certainly not of Gilman's, Gould's or Gordon's ilk. This generation had lost everything their fathers had had: the racially restricted vote, segregated universities and neighbourhoods, and the taken-for-granted expectation of a comfortable job after graduation. The comfortable cushion which their race and gender had bought in the past was beginning to erode, and having to compete on however inadequately equal terms was for them a frightening experience. They still had the lifestyle: the Black maid, the Black gardener, the swimming pool and the two-car family. But a new world was beginning to open up and, I suspect, the very fact that a Black woman had the power to judge their work came to have a deeply symbolic meaning to them.

What I remember most was the sheer sense of entitlement they possessed, such that, although the white boys constituted only 25 per cent of the tutorial population, they insisted on occupying 90 per cent of the tutorial talking time, not to mention my attention. The assumptions of their race and their gender were never clearer than when they 'forgot' to give the Black student next to them space to speak, listen and be heard.

So, in that tutorial about Sarah Bartmann lines were drawn. When the white boys tried to be rude I quelled them with a glance. With the Black girls I did my best. I set an

essay on aspects of the history of sexism and racism and prescribed my own and other Black women's work, which up to that point had seemingly escaped the course co-ordinator's attention. I don't know how well I did with the Black girls. All I know is that one of them is handing in her honours thesis as I write.

It was a contradictory experience. I remember it as singularly humiliating: the very fact that the economic exploitation of my labour could put me in a situation where I was actually teaching racist and sexist texts is something to which I have never completely reconciled myself. I felt complicit in my own and others' oppression. I used to look at the young faces of the students, listen to their hopes and dreams, and think of the system which awaited their working lives.

There I was in the process of reproducing capitalist labour power, and this very same colonial capitalism demanded of me either complete assimilation or exposure to sexual ridicule. My economic exploitation was racialised and gendered in a particularly vicious way. Assimilation left me no choice but to be content with reproducing the racism and sexism which oppressed me. This would have rendered me complicit in my own oppression, with self-hatred and self-loathing the inevitable end result. Being economically exploited in a sexual manner is not an unusual position for a Black woman to be in. Like so many before me, I turned to struggle as a means to regain sanity.

There, as I taught, I formed a determination to write anti-texts, texts which did not 'other' Black women, texts which conceived the Black woman as Self. Then was born the decision to write a biography of Sarah Bartmann, a book which Black girls could safely take home to mother and study in the kitchen.

I also learned that no oppression can stop you from learning. Giddings writes:

It is no coincidence that Sarah Bartmann became a spectacle in a period when the British were debating the prohibition of slavery...Euro-Americans had to resolve the contradictions between their own struggle for political freedom and



the black men and women they still enslaved. This contradiction was resolved (by both pro- and anti-slavery whites) by racialism: inscribing certain inherited characteristics to blacks, characteristics that made them unworthy of first class citizenship. At the core of these characteristics was the projection of the dark side of sexuality, now literally embodied by black females...By the turn of [the] nineteenth century, then, race had become an ideology, and a basis of that ideology had become sexual difference. (Giddings 1992: 445–6)

I began to see that these scenes where my body kept on coming onto the table were happening to me because auntie Sarah and I shared a history shaped by racism, sexism and economic exploitation. The fight I was fighting was about me. This realisation helped me solve an intellectual problem: as a historian, I study change over time, yet the more I began to challenge white male rights to call us names, the more I was beginning to think that nothing had changed. Now I saw that change was in fact the issue. White males were saying to me subtly and sometimes more directly, ‘You want to insist on being Khoekhoe, you are going to have to accept our identity: Brown = sex object.’ They were saying this precisely because the fight of people of colour around the world against racism had forced them to change, precisely because we had challenged their nice resolutions of their own little contradictions. What I was experiencing was (I hope) the last-ditch battle. The historical process begun in auntie Sarah’s time was ending in mine, provided (I thought) I could keep up the fight.

I also began to understand that the reproduction of Gilman’s text in the context of a university course in Cape Town in 1995 was not ideologically innocent. Its content and location was designed to reinforce at an ideological level the bastions of race and gender which were beginning, however slowly, to crumble. I might have taken longer to realise this had it not been for an incident in which I was killed before my own eyes. It was towards the end of a slightly tense tutors’ meeting at which we had discussed the



teaching of a module on Khoekhoe history. One tutor asked the course co-ordinator idly, as the meeting was winding down, ‘So do you think there are any Khoekhoe still around, you know, people who still practise their culture, I mean?’ The co-ordinator replied, ‘No, physically there may be some genetic mixtures still around [with a sidelong glance at me] but their culture is extinct. You might find some remote tribes, but even there their culture is dying out in the face of westernisation.’

What really brought this incident into the realm of the surreal was the fact that I was at that very moment sitting and chewing on a piece of biltong. They always liked to have tutors’ meetings during the lunch hour. This was a piece of home-made biltong, lovingly made by my aunt and sent to me by my mother.

Such was my state of mind, as near as I can describe it, when this white man came to extinguish my community and my culture in a sentence. And me with them, for who am I without my community and culture? I could not prevent what happened next. I looked at the biltong, looked at him, looked at the biltong again and burst out laughing. The meeting broke up somewhat hurriedly, with me still wavering between hysterical giggles and perfectly distracted stares.

With hindsight, I regret that I could not take this symbolic genocide more seriously. Had I bent my mind to it I could possibly have started a small revolution on that sentence. But to see him denying my material culture while it was being consumed in front of their own eyes was too much. I don’t know who they thought had taught my aunt to make biltong.

If I have learned anything from my great-grandmother it is that they cannot stop us from laughing. They dispossessed us of our land, took our cattle, made us slaves and stole our language. We don’t have much left besides our sense of humour. Colonialism is a very serious matter – except when it is completely ludicrous. Vine Deloria says:

When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that people can survive.<sup>6</sup> (Deloria 1992: 346)

And, survive I did.

## A daughter digresses

I learned from this experience to respect auntie Sarah’s strength. This continual exposure in public was a trial to me. How much worse must it not have been for her? Although I knew that a comparison between oppressions is not really meaningful, I infinitely preferred the symbolic exploitation to her real exploitation: I would rather dance in front of seminars with all my clothes on, than perform in a cage in a thin costume. My conditions of labour felt still easier than hers.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt that it was time to expose the exposers. Giddings had made me think about the construction of racism: ‘this contradiction was

resolved...by racialism.' Seeing the functioning of racism in my own times let me see more clearly how it functioned in auntie Sarah's time. One of the things I did during the fighting period was to think seriously about this identity white males had created for us, and how it had shaped both our lives and theirs. So I wrote a paper on British imperial history. I wanted to explain how the exhibition of auntie Sarah served a purpose in the fabrication of an imperial culture, one which both built ideologies of racism, and divided constructions of gender by race. I wrote that:

Ideas of race from Sarah Bartmann's time on were to be inextricably entwined with the struggle over gender definitions. In that sense it is bizarrely fitting that, as European scientific ideas about the Khoekhoe were extended to include all Blacks, and eventually all people of colour, the grand edifice of scientific racism came to be built on Sarah Bartmann's body...This paper...rests on the conviction that the various uses of Sarah Bartmann, the metaphor, underpinned and reinforced the relations of power in which the living woman was embedded. (Abrahams 1997b: 134; cf. Deloria 1992)

Then, this seemed like progress, since the very fact that I was able to write about auntie Sarah at all seemed to show that I was finding a way out of my language problem.

What I was trying to do was to restore Sarah Bartmann to history, and her history to auntie Sarah. I felt the paper was a good reaction to the kind of British imperial history which was all about causes emanating from the metropole and effects in the periphery. It could work the other way round too, I argued, and I felt this was an important point to make. I was never quite easy in my mind, though, that I had made a solid case. For one, the relations of power were so hopelessly unequal. Auntie Sarah may have intervened in the discursive construction of gender in Britain, but she had very little influence over the process. For another, writing about 'Sarah Bartmann, the metaphor' felt like reducing her to object status again.

After all, what was the real difference between what I was writing and the Comaroffs' contribution to the historiography?

One item among the potpourri of curiosities in the *Animal Kingdom* was a description of the 'Hottentot Venus', an 'essential black' from the Cape Colony. This unfortunate 'wild woman' of Khoi ancestry had been taken to Europe and ...ended up on Cuvier's dissecting table. His famous account of her autopsy was to be reprinted twice within a decade of its publication; it centered on the anomalies of her 'organ of generation', which, in its excessive development of the *labia minora*, was held to set her kind apart from human beings. (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 104)

It took me a while to see the similarity because this kind of sophisticated text requires some decoding. It takes a stance which distances itself from the people under discussion through coy quotation marks and passive terminology: 'had been taken...centered...ended

up...was held'. Another way of putting it: 'Ooops, these things just happened.' The Comaroffs do not approve of Cuvier, it is clear, but it didn't seem to me as if they were particularly concerned about the fate of this nameless 'wild woman' either. Perhaps it was not their business. The text, this time, was about Cuvier, or was it about the process whereby '...the bourgeois subject of the new Age of Capitalism, already secure in the Protestant ethic and rational Philosophy, was given uncontested grounding in biological nature' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 101)? What the text was not about was mine and auntie Sarah's history, except insofar as she functioned as an object in aiding the Euroamerican understanding of itself. There is a sense in which the Comaroffs were doing precisely that, you may note, which Cuvier was doing.

I have found that, like Bal's text, this kind of quasi-liberal text tends to be an exercise in modern white people using Black people as objects in trying to excuse/understand the sins of their academic fathers and, therefore, themselves. This method decontextualises what to us is the crucial subject: Black history. And the more it decontextualises, the more conservative and downright racist meanings begin to creep in. I am not talking about simple things like the fact that white people have names and Black people do not. No. Just see how that 'excessive development of the *labia minora*' creeps in at the end. The distancing technique and the fact that this phrase is not in quotation marks (our attention being diverted elsewhere, you see) lends this remark authenticity. The shape, cause or history of this idea is not an issue, except as a minor footnote in the history of white ideas. This kind of analysis makes reality by omission.

To me, it was the issue for the longest time; not by choice but out of necessity – the necessity to be a self-defined, biltong-chewing subject with a sense of humour – I had devoted a considerable amount of effort to investigating the manipulation that went into creating the 'Sarah Bartmann anomaly'. This exposure quite logically revealed some most distasteful details about colonising science and culture. The study of physical manipulations succeeded in shedding light on the culture which, almost two centuries later, produced the papers I have been discussing. My imperial paper was an attempt to relate this manipulation to the process of creating a colonial culture. I did this via 'Sarah Bartmann, metaphor'. But another word for metaphor is 'thing'. There is a sense in which I was doing precisely that, you may note, which the Comaroffs were doing.

Restoring, recontextualising, rebutting can be very good and probably necessary work. Still, all this time, what I actually wanted to do was to write about auntie Sarah, the woman. I wanted to tell the story of who she was, what she ate, how she lived – a biography. A question which had been troubling me from the start was: why the Khoekhoe? The Khoekhoe have functioned as an archetype for centuries. Some of the most racist ideas thought up by Europeans were first elucidated about the Khoekhoe and then extended to apply to other oppressed peoples. I wanted to approach this question by exploring the triple intersection of the identity African/native/slave. Yet I could not. Even had I been able to find the words, I simply did not have the time. All this re-work was getting in the way.

The process of rebutting white male identities was making it impossible for me to simply affirm auntie Sarah's. And because she was part of my history, I was making myself an orphan in the process. The more I could not write her history, the less I was opposing the colonial process which had deprived me of my history.

We have a proverb: '*slim vang sy baas*' (clever catches his boss).<sup>7</sup> White male insistence on the essentially sexual nature of our identity was forcing me to think seriously about sexuality, or the lack of it, and the way I finally thought myself out of this bind was through a debate on sexuality. Washington argues that the identity 'Black woman = sex' has, in fact, shaped over a century of African women's writing in America:

Women's sexuality is another subject treated very differently by men and women writers. In the male slave narrative, for example, sexuality is nearly always avoided, and when it does surface it is to report the sexual abuse of female slaves. The male slave narrator was under no compulsion to discuss his own sexuality nor that of other men. As far as we know, the only slave narrator forced to admit a sexual life was Linda Brent...sexuality literally made women an unfit subject for literature. In Harlem Renaissance literature, as Barbara Christian reminds us, only male writers felt free to celebrate eroticised sexuality: 'The garb of uninhibited passion wears better on a male, who after all, does not have to carry the burden of the race's morality or lack of it.' (Washington 1990: 36–7)

I need to digress for a moment to make this point absolutely lucid: the necessity which confronted me in writing about the misuses of auntie Sarah's story was the same which confronted other Black women writing about slavery, namely, the gendered obligation to defend the nation's morality. For an African woman this is a particularly hazardous road. As Amadiume says:

The greatest insult to an African is to curse his or her mother or to refer to his or her mother's vagina (which explains the angry reactions of many Africans to the insults heaped on Africans by bourgeois women on the issue of women's circumcision). (Amadiume 1997: 165)

This cultural attribute originates from respect for motherhood, and is a token of the historically great respect paid to motherhood. The very nature of blasphemy, after all, rests on insulting that which we hold most holy. Yet it has become the old colonial story. That which originally was good and wholesome – respect for motherhood – has become yet another tool for oppression. Obbo notes that:

Women's roles and contributions in the rural areas as farmers, wives, mothers and homemakers often prove a hindrance to female emancipation. In order to keep women in the villages, the majority of men have developed arguments justifying women's role as part of African tradition. However, even rural women insisted: 'Traditions that break women's backs, that take women's work for

granted without any reward, that keep women at home, that insist on morality for women only, must be forgotten.' (Obbo 1980: 28)

The burden of the race's morality has become an oppressive one. In carrying it, it seems that African women have enabled a gendered morality which operates in such a way that the men are exempted from the necessity of acting morally. To insist that this is 'tradition' is to ignore the very history which created the burden of the race's morality in the first place. For, although colonialism has oppressed all of us, it oppresses women in specific ways from which men largely are exempted. I cannot understand why she who is doubly oppressed should have extra burdens to carry.

The prohibition on mentioning female private parts is the reason why there is so little open debate about women's sexuality in Africa. The sexual abuse of women is also a part of that debate. There is no language into which it can fit. Ideally, a respectful debate can happen only in gender-segregated environments. It is a 'woman's issue', since here too, the burden of the nation's morality is borne by women. With this I have no problem, since it is right and proper that history should be written without insults. Occasional gender separation is a custom I am comfortable with.

The problem is that African women sometimes need to oppose the mutilation of female bodies in the public, multiracial and multi-gendered sphere where it can make a difference, for the power and the violence which makes it possible for this mutilation to take place is not solely a 'woman's issue'. And it is precisely our role as guardians of the family which impels us to speak of this monstrous threat to the lives and happiness of young women. We then find ourselves in the position of first having to invent a language. But African women place themselves outside their culture when they do, for the 'bearers of morality' should respect themselves first. So our culture, which is otherwise a source of strength, operates against us in this matter. In order to demand an end to the violation of female bodies, it is necessary to mention the unmentionable in public.

I do not know if this African custom was so strong before colonialism. I do have a problem if custom becomes a means of silencing African women. This seems to me to go against the very grain of tradition, in the African sense of a series of negotiated settlements aimed at preserving community and a sense of collective history. Yet so strong is this custom that debates which are of life-sustaining importance to us as women are being silenced.

Like the rural women who sought freedom and independence in the cities, African women who wish to protest sexual violence are having to do so without the comfort of respectability. As long as they are prepared to be symbols of morality, it is all right, but as soon as they want to become empowered beings through language, they can no longer be respectable. It must be a sad and brittle respectability which is so easily lost. Yet African women may hang on to it because, in the midst of multiple disposessions, it is all they have. Many feel that it is better to be the oppressed wife, respected in theory although despised in practice, than to be branded a prostitute. So the hatred which was exerted against us becomes internalised. Sexual violence, refracted through our own

gendered morality, has rendered women mute. It is no wonder that Awa Thiam begins her book with a discussion of voice:

Black women have been silent for far too long. Are they now beginning to find their voices? Are they claiming the right to speak for themselves? Is it not high time that they discovered voices, that – even if they are unused to speaking for themselves – they now take the floor, if only to say they exist, that they are human beings – something that is not always immediately obvious – and that, as such, they have a right to liberty, respect and dignity? (Thiam 1978: 11)

Sexual violence against African women has aimed to deprive us of our humanity. As such it is not only a ‘women’s issue’. That we have at all needed to assert the existence of our humanity is testimony to how far generations of sexual violence waged against us have succeeded. To be human is to speak. We need a language, and a custom, which will enable us to speak of our experience and needs.

I have digressed enough. What I began to think about at this stage of writing about auntie Sarah’s story was generations of rebuttal. Our post-emancipation, neocolonial history was all about proving that we were so much more than sex. In the process, just like I never came round to writing auntie Sarah’s history, we never became all we could be.

Carby reached a point like this and found power:

But instead of concentrating upon the domination of a white feminist theoretical discourse which marginalizes non-white women, I focus on the production of a discourse of sexuality by black women. By focusing on the sexual and cultural politics of black women who constructed themselves as sexual subjects through song, in particular the blues, I want to assert an empowered presence. (Carby 1999: 8)

‘Empowered presence’ sounded like just the thing for me. Constructing ourselves as self-loving subjects sounded just like what I needed. I wanted to be finished with rehashing old white insults. The very next thing I wanted to do was that biography.

## Rebels

When I wrote the imperial paper I was at the height of my re-fighting period. I couldn’t stop because the more I fought, the angrier I grew. Nor is this surprising since the pettiest things about the research process itself were enough to drive anyone to violence. I don’t know what offensive name the whites called your people, but they used to call us ‘Hottentots and Bushmen’. I could not find a library computer on two continents which listed literature on auntie Sarah under anything other than ‘Hottentot Venus’. Try ‘Bartmann, Sarah’ and you would come up blank. I am happy to say that the University of Cape Town library is now an exception to this rule. Book indexes were a nightmare.

So the only way I could even begin to do research about auntie Sarah was by using a rude and offensive term. Imagine what it would be like to have to look up facts about Sojourner Truth under a term like ‘nigger’! That was my position.

All that fighting was making me tired. I started to wonder if I could make it through enough years and, more and more, I began to wonder if I was using the right weapons. To make matters worse, auntie Sarah was starting to hit the news in South Africa. The text this time was different; it was about the movement to bring her home again for burial. Still, the same images were recycled as offensively as before. At my breakfast table I opened up the paper and stared a caricature, purporting to be her naked body, in the face. I attended one conference where a white man showed me a whole file full of these clippings. It was, to him, the token of his political conscience. It began to seem that in political as in academic discourses – not that academic discourses are not political in nature – Khoekhoe women had but one thing to offer.

I knew that the re-emergence of these decontextualising texts in modern times is intimately linked to the success we have had (albeit contradictory) in decolonising our minds and our lands. Wilmsen writes:

Clearly, the discourse of Stone Age savagery has changed little during the...years it has been part of the existential Euroamerican consciousness. And it continues to play the role initially reserved for it, that of metaphoric underpinning for the self-recognition of that consciousness. In the nineteenth century, living persons were taken from their homelands to be displayed in colonial capitals as representatives of their savage state...Ethnography now fulfils this need; it can do so for modern tastes grown somewhat squeamish about using actual bodies because...displaying difference and writing about it serve the same ideological function. (Wilmsen 1989: 35)

I am not in a position to comment on the criticisms which have been made on Wilmsen’s use of evidence (cf. Lee & Guenther 1991). I am not entirely happy with the structuralist nature of his history, though, where the Khoekhoe easily become little more than hapless victims of insuperable economic forces. But in his critique of the intellectual antecedents of the two great master sciences in Khoekhoe studies, namely archaeology and anthropology, he is spot on. He puts his finger on the method with which these sciences operate: by cutting off their victims from the social and economic reality around them. Cheikh Anta Diop writes:

It is recognized that a biased anthropologist can whiten a Black or blacken a White by a tendentious interpretation of measurements and carefully selected partial analyses. (Diop 1991: 2)

In writing of Sarah Bartmann without writing about her, anthropologists succeeded in lining her up for symbolic display without making any sense of her life and times. A carefully selected partial analysis succeeded in confirming ‘facts’ about her which were

not, in fact, facts. The symbolic function was to buttress white male supremacy. The male ‘existential Euroamerican consciousness’ cannot continue to exist without such constant buttressing. It is in this context that we must understand the tremendous proliferation of Sarah Bartmann texts in the late twentieth century, which mention her without granting her life. Her literary function was to be abused, by any one of the textual mechanisms in use: decontextualisation, depersonalisation, objectification and insult.

Two examples: Altick could do no better for Sarah Bartmann than to list her as a ‘heavy arsed heathen’ (Altick 1978: 269). Lindfors not only cites this but also continues to refer to her as a ‘fat-arsed female’ (Lindfors 1983: 100). The perpetuation of ridicule serves a purpose: Auntie Sarah is exhumed only to be insulted.

It is not just that this display is not benign. As I have already said, the white male historiography was inhospitable to me simply because there were no good symbolic role models for me. These texts went one step further by positing Black womanhood as nothing more than the subject of ridicule and insult. We have a proverb: ‘As jy niks goed kan sê nie, sê dan liewer niks’ (If you can’t say anything good, rather say nothing). It is the prevalence of texts which rather say something nasty than nothing at all which disturbs me.

Altick’s study is revealing about the function of symbolic display in freak shows and circuses. At times, he deals with his freakish material by distancing himself through a dry irony:

No longer did much aura of sentimental primitivism surround such people. Instead, besides the perennial interest any strange-looking and -acting human being had for the show-going public and the proof such creatures presented of mankind’s variety, they owed their appeal to a new climate of interest in nineteenth century England. In the preceding century, what small knowledge of human behaviour and primitive culture had been obtained from imported savages remained for the most part unorganized and unscientific...Now appeared the first stirrings of what would become, by the late 1840s the infant science of ethnology, for which, of course, living specimens of barbaric or savage races constituted prime raw material. Simultaneously, the imperialism which accompanied the early *pax Victoria* was weaving ethnology, geography and the nation’s economic and geopolitical aspirations into a single seamless pattern. (Altick 1978: 268)

Heavy going, and had it been about a white male instead of auntie Sarah I could have forgiven the temptation to leaven it with a little irony. But humour is culture contingent – and what can one possibly say about a scholarly culture that would find this acceptable? In Altick’s work, the freakishness of the business he is studying is all too often reproduced in his text. This causes problems of representation. ‘Primitivism’, ‘strange-looking’, ‘savages’, ‘barbaric’ on the one side; ‘a single seamless pattern’ on the other.

In Lindfors’s hands, this mindless racism is taken one step further. The hatred drips from the text:

She was willing to collaborate in her own degradation in order to earn more money...She had agreed to allow herself to be exhibited indecently to the European public, and she persisted in this tawdry occupation for more than five years, stopping only when her health finally broke down. She may have been the victim of the crudest kind of predatory ruthlessness, but her collusion in her own victimization was unmistakable. (Lindfors 1985: 148)

But this is not history. It is an exercise in racial and sexual hatred. Lindfors, citing a French anthropologist's 1915 speech in which he repeated rumours he had heard in 1875, concluded:

To put it plainly, she may have engaged in prostitution as well as exhibitionism. Her degradation may have been complete. (Lindfors 1985: 148)

As the Sarah Bartmann story grew stale by repetition, it seemed as if white males had to think up ever more emotionally charged stories to get the same excitement quotient out of it. There was more, even more offensive, which I shall spare you. By this time I was sick of analysing racist texts.

Hatred and insult have just one effect on those who are at the receiving end. It makes 'one' tired. Researching Sarah Bartmann's life is the most exhausting job I have ever had; it is treading a heavy winepress.

This is not to say that the politicisation of auntie Sarah's story was not in itself a good thing. For one thing, her life was obviously very much about politics from the beginning, and for another, some victories just cannot be won in the academic sphere, but only on the streets outside. It gave me a curious feeling of satisfaction when the Griquas, a section of the Khoekhoe people who can trace their tradition of resistance way back to 1656, took up auntie Sarah's cause. Still, the publicity accompanying it brought some unexpected consequences. Journalists did not scruple to argue against the Griqua position in the guise of 'objective' reportage:

The fact that Saartje pleaded in a court case that she did not perform under duress and received half the profits did not change the Griqua perspective on her 'undignified' exploitation. (*Toronto Globe and Mail* 01.01.1996)

I was getting emotionally exhausted because nobody was looking at the conditions of her labour. So long as these writers could make out that she was complicit in her own oppression, nobody cared about its economics. All that de-stuff I've been talking about concentrated on Sarah Bartmann, the thing-as-metaphor. While white male authors were getting excited writing about her body, it seems that they were forgetting that she was a human being who laboured in a capitalist system.

In this respect, complicity has been one of the fundamental myths in the Sarah Bartmann story. Most accounts do not mention her status as worker at all, since most accounts are only interested in one thing. The ones that do mention her status as worker

implicitly deny any link between slavery and the creation of Sarah Bartmann as the ultimate sexual signifier by the simple expedient of not making any link. Slavery is, of course, a matter which is of crucial importance to the descendants of slaves because it defines our identity. Being a descendant of slaves writing about slaves has taught me of this double bind – I am a person whose name was lost studying people whose names were taken. Far be it from me to suggest that the name my mother gave me is not a ‘proper’ name. What I am saying here is that it is not the name she would have chosen, had we not been colonised.

So there I was: tired, exhausted and still angry. I had defined a relationship to auntie Sarah, *but I did not know her birth name*. In principle we were both fine with that – after a century or so you learn to have relationships where neither party has an African name and we converse in English, in a metaphorical sense – but not knowing her birth name was an important clue. Since she was born in the 1780s on the eastern Cape frontier, she must have had a Khoekhoe name. It was far too early, and too far out in the country, for her parents to have been so colonised that they would not have given her a native name. So she must have had one. How and at what point did she then lose this name and come into the records as ‘Sarah Bartmann’? In Africa there are only two ways – through religious colonisation or through slavery. But auntie Sarah was baptised much later, in Manchester in 1811, so it was unlikely that she could have been baptised in the Cape. Brooding about names led me to the conclusion that she must have been a slave.

The other point, of course, is geography. Somewhere between 1790 and 1809 auntie Sarah would have had to pass through the heartland of Khoekhoe slavery – the wine districts of the southern and southwestern Cape – in order to get from her birthplace to the ship which took her to England. She may have spent years in this passage. To be Black and to live in these areas without being a slave was so unusual at the time that it was explained and specified. Black people who were not slaves were such an anomaly that they had to carry papers to that effect: these named them ‘Free Blacks’. Khoekhoe were not ‘Free Blacks’ because they were not legally enslaved. But the customary enslavement of the Khoekhoe was such an established social fact that those who were free enough to travel from one place to another had to have official pieces of paper to that effect. These pieces of paper were called passes, and Sarah Bartmann did not possess one. So she must have been a slave.

Up to this point in my personal history the slave story had been for me an intellectual issue, a matter of evidence and methodology. Watching the myth that was being built up around her being used against the struggle of her own people, I saw the politics of it. Maybe all that fighting was misdirected. Maybe the issue was not which weapons I used. Knowledge is power, and I knew auntie Sarah was a slave. I knew it, but to whom was I saying this?

So I wrote a paper on Khoekhoe slavery. I took the evidence and methodology and turned it around. I took auntie Sarah seriously and connected her personal history to the history of Khoekhoe. I argued that the reason why historians could get away with

pretending that she wasn't a slave was because of their historical refusal to acknowledge Khoekhoe slavery.

To me this paper was fundamentally important. Oddly enough, it was precisely at the moment when I defined auntie Sarah as in a position of complete objectification, as a slave, that I began to see agency in her story. I wrote:

To expect her in these circumstances to tell the truth would be to ignore the likely effects of the culture born of slavery in which she was brought up. The historical experience of her people had given her reasonable grounds to expect that her testimony against a white man was not likely to be credited, and the consequences for herself were likely to be terrible; in short, that justice would be administered on a racial basis. In view of Mr Gaseley's expressed ideas about Khoekhoe people, there is a strong possibility that she was right. (Abrahams 1996: 94)

It is sad that the thing I thought auntie Sarah did with this agency was to lie. But I suggested she lied because she had to. I argued that when she saw herself as having only two choices – that of telling the truth and possibly spending the rest of her life in jail, or of lying and returning to a state of slavery outside jail – she lied.

The good part was that here I was doing all those things I had previously found so hard: writing history and writing in that language. Best of all I was finding such lovely turns of phrase: 'she was brought up', she 'expected', 'she was right'. What lovely sentences can be created with the Black woman as a restored subject.

This paper let me bring auntie Sarah home, not just to Khoekhoe history but to the history of Black women all over the world. It allowed me to make connections between her personal experience of being colonised and our collective colonial history. Joan Martin says:

The nature of moral goodness and its relation to enslaved women's work is the underlying theme for the third characterization of Black women's work. Here, Black women's control of their own bodies and sexuality, and their reproductive capacities make a work ethic a complex matter fraught with ambiguity. Enslaved women were exploited for their labor power. This included exploitation as sexual objects and as breeders of the slave owner's human capital. According to Joanne Braxton, enslaved women knew that they were 'sexual laborers' and producers of children for the slave market, and that these factors made women a commodity different and unique from men. (Martin 1995: 72)

As I reproduced human capital and endured sexual harassment, I realised that there was no time limit to the after-effects of slavery. As long as Black women's material exploitation oscillates between those two poles, the ambiguities will remain. The least I could do as a historian, I thought, was to attempt to put things into perspective so that those who wondered about these things would understand. The ambiguities come out of slavery; I published that paper.

Whenever I think about my evolving relation to auntie Sarah's story, I suspect I am not as bright as my mother always said. Up to this point I had retained a naïve belief that 'the truth' mattered. I still thought that if I played by their rules and presented all my evidence, I could manage to convince white scholars that Sarah Bartmann did not choose her fate.

Until then, I had never thought of this 'ambiguity' manuscript as serious academic work. I thought of the truth as 'out there', and of evidence and methodology as something I was doing in the context of auntie Sarah's story, not my own. The idea that my emotions were data which could lead me to the truth, or that my inner truth mattered, in an intellectual sense, was not something I understood, then. The thought that these emotions could provide an academic methodology was not one which occurred to me in all of this time. Still I wrote, hurriedly before returning to my 'real' work, not knowing what I was writing this for.

The strange thing was that in my work and life outside this intellectual world, I would be the first to claim that Black women were expert witnesses to racism and sexism. If a Black person said something was racist I would take her word before a white person's. If a woman said it was sexist I would take her word before a man's. And what was auntie Sarah's story about, then, if not about racism and sexism creating the conditions under which she had to make her choices for good or evil? Yet I was denying my emotional expertise in these matters by refusing to make it part of my academic work.

The change, for me, came when I moved beyond the re-work. There is a difference between re-butting, re-searching, re-contextualising and re-calling names, on the one hand, and an autonomous self-named story on the other. In the first, I am still allowing white males to set the terms of debate. I am fighting on their territory. This is a cardinal mistake oom !Nanseb /Gabemab (Captain Hendrik Witbooi)<sup>8</sup> had warned against. So I spent much time reading writers and practitioners of resistance, searching for tactics. I learned that guerrilla warfare is about forcing your enemies to come and look for you on territory of your choosing.

I learned from Captain Witbooi about the rightness of time. A great strategist is one who does things in the right and proper season. So oom !Nanseb wrote in his youth: '*Toro-/garu tama ta ha. Amase ni //nati habatsi sa oms \kat ge gowa !Kuub ei-/a khemi*' (I did not come intending war. But truly, now I shall come over you, because you have invited this war into your home, [so I shall come] in the power of the Almighty).<sup>9</sup> In the wisdom of his later years, he wrote: 'Everything I can say has already been written, all I could do has been done.'<sup>10</sup> And it was with an eye towards that latter time, when I would be able to say the same, that I read on about the art of war. I needed the power to say what I needed to say. So I went right back to the beginning of my work, and practised becoming my own terrain of struggle. In the context of this symbolic struggle, I had to learn to become a self-definer. Here, in this manuscript, I set the stage. Here, I have power. This is my world.

Oddly enough, or perhaps not so, it was through reading white feminists on auntie Sarah that I came to this conclusion. Schiebinger, for instance, was a hard-working historian. Unlike many of those mentioned up to now, she went out of her way to find new sources of evidence about auntie Sarah and, very importantly, had these translated into English. She also evinced a proper concern with auntie Sarah's agency. The problem was that Schiebinger did not relate to her as 'auntie Sarah' at all. For one, Schiebinger's consistent use of the words 'Hottentot' and 'Bushman', without a shadow of a quotation mark, was lacking in respect, not to mention sensitivity. Also, at the same time as she was searching for agency, she seemed to be writing auntie Sarah out of the script:

...neither the dominant theory of race nor of sex in this period applied to women of non-European descent, particularly black women. Like other females, they did not fit comfortably into the great chain of being. Like other Africans, they did not fit European gender ideals. (Schiebinger 1993: 160)

That the white male scientists who were creating 'dominant theories of race or of sex' might have been thinking that these were separate theories was perhaps uncontroversial. That Schiebinger, after over a decade of Black feminist polemics, still thought so, was inexcusable. The dominant theory of race was eminently gendered, and the dominant theory of gender was racialised from the time auntie Sarah came on the scene. By arguing that dominant discourses on gender and race developed separately, Schiebinger ignored much of the evidence she herself presented on the way the Khoekhoe in particular had been characterised as sexually deviant from the inception of European colonialism in southern Africa (cf. Schiebinger 1993: 91, 115, 135–6). To then end her discussion of Sarah Bartmann with the question, 'Why, then, did anatomists and anthropologists privilege *male* bodies when investigating race and *European* bodies when examining sex?' missed the point (Schiebinger 1993: 172). Why are we not displaying naked anthropologists and anatomists, if they are the subjects of our text?

Fausto-Sterling gave yet another demonstration of the tendency to lose sight of Sarah Bartmann altogether and instead to consider the ideas and feelings of the white participants in her life story. This is not unexpected, considering the postmodern emphasis on human subjectivity and academic construction. In fact, the modern resurgence of texts on Sarah Bartmann must be seen in the light of these changing emphases. Fausto-Sterling pointed out the historical parallels between the early nineteenth century and our time, but still with such a familiar segregated mindset:

These new accounts are significant. Just as during the nineteenth century she became a vehicle for the redefinitions of our concepts of race, gender and sexuality, her present recasting occurs in an era in which the bonds of empire have broken apart, and the fabric of the cultural systems of the nations of the north Atlantic has come under critical scrutiny. (Fausto-Sterling 1996: 20)

Just whose is ‘our’? The personal history of auntie Sarah just became irrelevant. Just consider the questions which Fausto-Sterling asked:

What was the importance of these dissections to the scientists who did them and the society that supported them? What social, cultural and personal work did these scientific forays accomplish, and how did they accomplish it? Why did the anatomical descriptions of women of color seem to be of such importance to biologists of the nineteenth century? (Fausto-Sterling 1996: 20)

While the honesty may be refreshing, it may be seen that auntie Sarah’s role in this story was still limited to that of a dead body. What is more, this body was relevant only insofar as it allowed us to shed light on western culture and science. The concern with subjectivity and social construction is, it seems, limited to that of western observation. This article has no intentions of relating to the Khoekhoe, or indeed to Africans at all. In this sense, these writings about auntie Sarah are not histories at all, at least with regard to her and her people. Rather, they represent a renewed use of her body.

It remains for me to shed light on what was not said. I need to speak about the symbolic sexual abuse which I was experiencing in my life. It has taken me a long time to understand that there are places where the symbolic is as real as it can be, and that the violation of the space between my ears is not in my imagination.

Now, I wonder that I could have been so slow. For of course auntie Sarah was violated, and of course there is a need to write about it. Some key definitions: rape is an act of sexual violence, an expression of male power and female vulnerability. So let me go back to that first Gilman paper, and my experiences upon reading it. Was it not rape of a symbolic sort to parade the degradation and humiliation of auntie Sarah before me? Was it not a sexually violent act which expressed male power and my vulnerability to pain? Has not each male author I have brought before you been unable to resist the temptation of demonstrating their psychosexual power and auntie Sarah’s inability to resist? Michele Jacques writes of Black bodies as evidence of a singular sort:

Black bodies testify to our strength, endurance, love of spirituality and oneness with earth and sky. From...slavery forward, devilish untruths about our embodiment have hindered the power of this testimony. Too often ‘the rocks have spoken’ in our place and a false witness has been given. (Jacques 1995: 129)

In place of false witness it is time to speak the truth. I name the posthumous abuse and degradation of auntie Sarah’s body, rape. The rape of her body is a rape of my mind. That this takes place on a symbolic level does not make it any less real than Cuvier’s dissection and re-engineering of auntie Sarah’s mortal remains. Altick lived to tell the tale, Lindfors to make fun of it. I find this to be surrogate violence against women. That auntie Sarah was dead and could not feel the abuse in her body makes this difference: I am alive and can feel it. The difference it makes to practise sexual abuse at a symbolic

level is that the perpetrators are undetected: the act is not named as such and occasionally even passes for ‘history’.

In order to clarify the meaning of this symbolic sexual violence, our definition of rape can be both refined and broadened. Toinette Eugene provides a womanist definition:

...the elements of sexual abuse are the violation of a person’s integrity by force and/or threat of physical violence, dishonouring the ethic of mutuality and care in relationships of domination, and an infraction of one’s psycho-spiritual-sexual integrity. Sexual abuse is a sacrilege of God’s Spirit in each of us. (Eugene 1995: 105)

If it is auntie Sarah’s credibility as a witness which shall determine the case, I shall lay the evidence before you. If it is my credibility as a witness which is at stake, the evidence lies before you here. I claim for us both the status as expert witnesses to the violence of which I speak.

I have documented the violence and shall do so again. I have shown that there has been a ‘dishonouring [of] the ethic of mutuality and care’ that should exist between the researcher and the researched. That there exists instead a relationship of domination between the white males who have written and the Black woman who has been ‘written’, is clear. I have made the case that auntie Sarah’s integrity – and my own – has been diminished thereby. My full humanity has been denied me.

As one Khoekhoe woman to another, I wanted to write a biography of a human life. This would have fulfilled me as a human being. I would have felt I lived a life worth living. This choice has been foreclosed by sexual abuse. My choice was only one of two: to pretend that none of this abuse was going on; or to confront it, admit it, and admit that it is happening to me. To choose the first is too dangerous. The chance would always exist that another white male would replay these abusive texts at a time of threat. In fact, wherever I look I see Black women working, striving to get by and struggling for a better world. It is very likely that white, property-owning males will feel very threatened in time to come.

Racism, sexism and their sexually abusive confluence have created the conditions in which I was not free to choose to be a biographer. Hill Collins explains how the system works:

These violent acts are the visible dimensions of a more generalized, routinized system of oppression. Violence against Black women tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned while the same acts visited on other groups may remain nonlegitimated and nonexcusable. Certain forms of violence may garner the backing and control of the state...Specific acts of sexual violence visited on African...women reflect a broader process by which violence is socially constructed in a race- and gender-specific manner. (Hill Collins 1990: 177)

The social construction of racism and sexism has rendered the abuse which was performed against auntie Sarah Bartmann’s body and her image socially invisible to the

perpetrators and, sometimes, to the victims. Instead, it has been represented as an ideologically innocuous activity. This academic violence has been state-subsidised and state-supported, represented as innocent by the mass media. In the process, it has rendered the violence done to other Black women, such as myself, invisible.

We should not make easy distinctions between symbolic and physical sexual abuse. An act has to be thinkable before you can commit it. In this sense, symbolic violence against women can be analysed by analogy with theories of physical violence. For example, Crenshaw argues that:

Rape and other sexual abuses in the work context, now termed sexual harassment, have been a condition of black women's work life for centuries. Forced sexual access to black women was of course institutionalized in slavery and was central to its reproduction...The stereotypes and myths that justified the sexual abuse of black women in slavery continue to be played out in current society. (Crenshaw 1992: 411)

I have discussed these stereotypes and myths at length. It remains only to mention that they have victimised me, and to demand that it comes to an end. If this chapter has done nothing more than render this abuse visible, it shall have served its purpose well.

Forced sexual abuse of Black women was institutionalised in slavery. Slavery was a point at which Black people were completely objectified: they were defined, by those who claimed the power to define, as being devoid of motive will. Choice in this context is meaningless. White law, white justice and white custom define rape as sexual violence without consent. Under slavery Black women could legally not be raped because they could legally neither consent nor dissent. They were not people. Does this mean they were not raped? Black women know the answer.

Black women know about the impossibility of choice through their historical experience. Today, rape is still defined in the courts as a matter of individual consent. It is also defined as an act against an individual woman. This is a definition which does not take into account the historical reality of Black women's lives. We know that the ruling culture retains the norm that Black women have no right not to consent. Lorraine Hansberry's heroine cited at the beginning of this chapter put her finger on it when she said 'if you're Brown, they're sure you're selling'. She was not free to choose the ruling culture which set the conditions under which she was sexually harassed; neither am I nor any other Black woman or girl. The ruling narrative structures create the conditions under which our consent is irrelevant. The question auntie Sarah and all other slaves had to answer was: what can choice really mean under conditions of absolute unfreedom? In our symbolic world, ruled by white supremacist, woman-hating narrative structures, this question still remains. Our only choice must be to choose to cease forthwith to practise violence against those of our own race and gender. In our relationships with one another we create our world. Here, we have power.

## Conclusion

I have always believed that, in trying to understand the world, the answers are only as important as the way you phrase the questions. Let me endeavour again: is there a ‘right’ history to be written about the crimes which were committed against us? This may be a strange question for a historian, but I am starting to see my elders’ reasoning. My elders chose, often, not to tell me of my history because the pain, anger and hatred were considered not suitable for children. Only with the attainment of a certain age and seniority have I, cautiously, been allowed to hear the stories. I wonder still, and often, if all this were not better forgotten. My grandmother-in-law used to try to teach me to forgive my enemies. For years I shrugged it off as turn-the-other-cheek stuff which had no place in our struggle. Then I began to think about this clever woman who is never too old to learn. My grandmother-in-law has certainly survived a life I would be too frightened to live. Now, I have come to understand that it was the other tradition of my people – that side by side with our struggle to be free, there lived a struggle to remain human. Forgiving your enemies is not about them – they can see to themselves – it is about us.

To write the history of pain, hatred and anger, without replicating and passing on the heavy burden of those unresolved emotions, would be a truly humane history of Africa.

I realised this when one Sunday afternoon at the South African National Gallery in 1996, at a meeting where Brown people from all over the country came together to protest against the continued exhibition of our ancestors’ bodies, I finally managed to find myself underneath years of academic socialisation. A slim Brown girl from the Kalahari said to the exhibitors, ‘If you knew our culture, you would not have done this thing.’

On that sunny afternoon on the slopes of Taub Homi<sup>11</sup> – the last place Sarah Bartmann saw as she was removed from the shores of Africa – I came to connect with my humanness. I spoke very little. There was no need when my people were all gathered together to speak. What I did say came from the heart. I said, ‘It hurts us.’ And now I understand that it was my humanness speaking, that it is precisely my native African self, the descendant of slaves, who has all these problems and issues of morality.

Our meeting, predictably perhaps, ended with a discussion of identity. A stout Brown man from Cape Town, in trying to find words to explain our sense of who we are now, said, ‘To be Khoekhoe means suffering.’ It means that exactly. What is this ‘I’ which feels pain? It is the hurt I feel when any of my people are objectified which forms the meeting between auntie Sarah Bartmann and myself. I do not seek to claim her suffering. There is more than enough of that going around to need to take another’s share. I do identify with it. Pain, though unendurable at the time, is easily forgotten when it is over. Ultimately, all that is going to matter is that we can be Khoekhoe again.

As a Brown woman, I know it must come to an end. As an academic, my particular part in this process has been to write the history of dehumanised colonial imaginings, but also the history of humanness against all odds. The former matters only because it measures the obstacles which we have overcome.

I will work out a way to explain to our children how it came about that things which we teach them are private and not a subject for public discussion in fact were a subject for white public discussion for three centuries, a process which necessitates my mentioning the unmentionable. Then I will teach them that it is not important, as long as we are good, as long as we retain faith in our power to be good. I have not yet managed to resolve all the ambiguities. I suspect the only way I will ever resolve them is when it is, in the colloquial sense, history. Until then, I can at least realise that I do not bring these contradictions on myself. Until then, I can realise my power to choose humanity.

## NOTES

- 1 Captain Witbooi to Manasse !Noreseb, Lidfontein 10.12.1888.
- 2 Sander Gilman has since publicly distanced himself from his 1985 paper, at a seminar held at the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, May 1996; a seminar at which the first part of this manuscript was presented in its original form.
- 3 Bal does raise the question (cf. Bal 1991: 29). She just doesn't answer it.
- 4 'Non-white' means the same as 'uncle Tom' in African American idiom. Its origin lies in the joke: 'Take away the "white" part and what are you left with? Nothing!'
- 5 About *Dioscorea Elephantipes* and the extraction of cortisone, cf. Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk (1972: 82). About *Bulbine* spp. of the eastern Cape, cf. Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk (1972: 12).
- 6 Another gem from this collection: 'It is said that when Columbus landed, one Indian turned to another and said: "Well, there goes the neighbourhood"' (Deloria 1992: 342).
- 7 This means that people who try to be too clever eventually get themselves into trouble.
- 8 Captain Hendrik Witbooi was a Khoekhoe leader in the nineteenth and early twentieth century trans-Gariep region (present-day Namibia).
- 9 Captain Hendrik Witbooi to Chief Maharero, senior, !Ga-os, 30.10.1885, cited in Heywood and Maasdorp (1995: 9).
- 10 Captain Witbooi to Captain Leutwein, Tsaam, 10.09.1894, in Heywood and Maasdorp (1995: 180).
- 11 The Khoekhoe name of Table Mountain means 'place of the Supreme Being'.

## REFERENCES

- Abrahams Y (1996) Disempowered to consent: Sara Bartman and Khoisan slavery in the nineteenth century Cape Colony and Britain. *South African Historical Journal*, 35: 94.
- Abrahams Y (1997a) The great long national insult: Science, sexuality and the Khoisan from 1780–1815. *Agenda*, 20, January: 67.
- Abrahams Y (1997b) Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, race and gender in early nineteenth century Britain. In PR Roach (ed) *Empire, colony, nation: Critical categories of race and gender analysis*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Altick RD (1978) *The shows of London*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Amadiume I (1997) *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion and culture*. London: Zed Books.
- Baker HA (1986) Caliban's triple play. In H Gates (ed) 'Race', writing and difference. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Bal M (1991) The politics of citation. *Diacritics*, 21(1): 25–45.
- Carby HV (1986) Lynching, empire and sexuality. In H Gates (ed) 'Race', writing and difference. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Carby HV (1999) *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*. London: Verso.
- Comaroff J & Comaroff J (1991) *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa* (vol. 1). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crenshaw K (1992) Whose story is it anyway? Feminist and antiracist appropriations of Anita Hill. In T Morrison (ed) *Race-ing justice, engendering power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the construction of social reality*. New York: Pantheon.
- Deloria V (1992) Indian humour. In M Anderson & P Collins (Eds) *Race, class and gender: An anthology*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Diop CA (1991) *Civilization or barbarism: An authentic anthropology*. New York: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Eugene TM (1995) 'If you get there before I do!': A womanist ethical response to sexual violence and abuse. In J Grant (ed) *Perspectives on womanist theology*. Atlanta, Georgia: ITC Press.

- Fausto-Sterling A (1996) Gender, race and nation: The comparative anatomy of 'Hottentot' women in Europe, 1815-1817. In J Terry & J Urla (Eds) *Deviant bodies: Critical perspectives on difference in science and popular culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gates H (ed) (1986) 'Race', writing and difference. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Giddings P (1992) The last taboo. In T Morrison (ed) *Race-ing justice, engendering power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the construction of social reality*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gilman S (1986) Black bodies, white bodies: Towards an iconography of female sexuality in late nineteenth century art, medicine and literature. In H Gates (ed) 'Race', writing and difference. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Gordon R (1992) The venal Hottentot venus and the great chain of being. *African Studies*, 51(2): 187.
- Gould SJ (1982) The Hottentot venus. *Natural History*, 91(10): 22-23.
- Hansberry L (1969) *To be young, gifted and black*. New York: Signet Press. Cited in P Collins (1990) *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman.
- Heywood A & Maasdorp E (Eds) (1995) *The Hendrik Witbooi papers*. Windhoek: National Archives of Namibia.
- Hill Collins P (1990) *Black feminist thought*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman.
- Jacques M (1995) Testimony as embodiment: Telling the truth and shaming the devil. In J Grant (ed) *Perspectives on womanist theology*. Atlanta, Georgia: ITC Press.
- Lee RB & Guenther M (1991) Problems in Kalahari historical ethnography and tolerance of error. *History in Africa: A Journal of Method*, 20: 185-235.
- Lindfors B (1983) 'The Hottentot venus' and other African attractions in nineteenth century England. *Australasian Drama Studies*, 1(2): 100.
- Lindfors B (1985) Courting the Hottentot venus. *Africa*, Rome, 40: 133-148.
- Martin JM (1995) A womanist investigation of the work ethic of antebellum enslaved women, 1830-1865. In J Grant (ed) *Perspectives on womanist theology*. Atlanta, Georgia: ITC Press. Cited in JM Braxton (1989) *Black women writing autobiography: A tradition within a tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Morrison T (1981) *Tar baby*. New York: New American Library.
- Obbo C (1980) *African women: Their struggle for economic independence*. London: Zed Books.
- Schiebinger L (1993) *Nature's body: Gender in the making of modern science*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Thiam A (1978) *Speak out black sisters: Feminism and oppression in black Africa*. London: Pluto Press.
- Todorov LM (1986) Race, writing and culture. In H Gates (ed) 'Race', writing and difference. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Washington MH (1990) 'The darkened eye restored': Notes towards a literary history of black women. In H Gates (ed) *Reading black, reading feminist: A critical anthology*. New York: Meridian.
- Watt JM & Breyer-Brandwijk W (1972) *The medicinal and poisonous plants of southern and eastern Africa*. London: Livingstone Press.
- Wilmsen E (1989) *Land filled with flies: A political economy of the Kalahari*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

# Contributors

## **Yvette Abrahams**

I was born in Cape Town in 1963 to struggle parents. I grew up in exile but made it home in 1983, just in time for the exciting part of the liberation struggle. I dropped out of varsity due to the state of emergency but was fortunate enough to return in 1991 until I completed my doctorate in history at the University of Cape Town in 2002. I have lived to see freedom, something we never dared hope would materialise in those exile days. Now, I grapple with building this unknown thing, freedom, concretising it in the form of land, water, housing and a garden to dream in.

## **Iris Berger**

As a feminist scholar and activist, I have spent my career writing books and articles on women's history, developing and administering women's studies programs, and working to promote gender equity on campus. My research has focused on both precolonial and more recent history of East and South Africa, including religion, labour, political movements, culture and social policy. I am currently Chair of the History Department at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

## **Helen Bradford**

As a child growing up in Durban, I was told that a girl was not allowed to do 'boy's things' – and promptly became a feminist. Later, I realised how much the past had shaped the present, and became a historian of South Africa. Among the topics I have examined through a gendered lens are war, labour, literature, photography, reproductive politics – and, currently, millenarianism in a colonial context.

## **Luli Callinicos**

I became interested in history from the time my father used to tell me bedtime stories about the ancient Hellenes and the history of the long liberation struggle of the Greeks against the Ottoman occupation. Since then, I have learned to look at the history and struggles of men and women in the land of my birth, particularly in the changing world of work. Testimony and biography have been an important part of my work. They are, I feel, the best way to understand the human condition, both today and in past times. I am currently working on a biography that explores the relationship between memory, agency, history and heritage. I am also Chairperson of the National Heritage Council.

**Janet Cherry**

I am an independent researcher and feminist activist based in Port Elizabeth. I am currently involved in research on women's rights in rural areas as well as historical research on the liberation struggle in the Eastern Cape. I have worked on research projects for the Human Science Research Council and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and taught at Rhodes University and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

**Jacklyn Cock**

I am a Professor of Sociology at the University of the Wtwatersrand in Johannesburg. I have written extensively on militarisation, gender and environmentalism in South Africa. Books I have published include *Maids and madams: A study in the politics of exploitation* (Johanenasburg: Ravan Press, 1980; London: The Women's Press, 1989), *Colonels and cadres: War and gender in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991) and *Melting pots and rainbow nations: Conversations about difference in the USA and South Africa* with Alison Bernstein. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002). I have also published edited collections with Laurie Nathan on militarisation, Eddie Koch on environmentalism and Penny MacKenzie on demilitarisation. My current research is on environmental justice in South Africa.

**Nomboniso Gasa**

A political activist against apartheid whose first of many detentions was at age 14 in the former Bantustan, Transkei, with a keen interest on Feminisms in Africa. I am pursuing postgraduate research at the University of South Africa's Department of History. My current research focus is primarily on '*Ubudoda: The making of a man amongst amaXhosa*'. This is a feminist study of the process of male initiation, drawing from comparative experiences across the continent and other rites of passage, including those undergone by women diviners and spirit mediums. I have previously published on gender, democratisation and political transformation in South Africa and Nigeria (where I worked for three years).

**Pat Gibbs**

I am an oral historian and focus on prioritising the voices of the past above the narratives of the present. I have co-written two chapters for the first two volumes of *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* for the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET).

### **Pumla Dineo Gqola**

I have a PhD in Postcolonial Studies from the University of Munich, Germany, where I wrote a thesis on slavery and the South African post-apartheid imagination. I am also a graduate of the Universities of Cape Town and Warwick, England. I have guest-edited special issues of the feminist journals, *Agenda* and *Feminist Africa* (with Elaine Salo) on sexuality and body image (2005) and subaltern sexualities (2006) respectively. Previously a Senior Lecturer at the University of the Free State, and Chief Research Specialist at the HSRC, I now lead OpenSpeak at the Meraka Institute and am Extraordinary Associate Professor at the University of the Western Cape.

### **Caroline Wanjiku Kihato**

I came to South Africa in 1994 having completed an undergraduate degree at the University of Nairobi. Like many migrants, I took a leap of faith, not knowing what I was going to do or how long I was going to stay. Twelve years ago, as I stepped out of the plane at Jan Smuts airport, I could not have imagined the personal and intellectual growth I would experience in South Africa, or the community of friends with whom I would share so much laughter and tears. I am currently a Policy Analyst at the Development Bank of Southern Africa, and editor of *Development Southern Africa*.

### **Sheila Meintjes**

I am a feminist scholar and gender activist and have been involved in feminist politics since the early 1970s. I also lecture in Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, where I teach African politics, political theory and feminist theory and politics. I was a full-time Commissioner in the Commission on Gender Equality between 2001 and early 2004. I am on the Boards of Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre against Violence against Women, Women'sNet, a women's communication and training organisation, the Women's and Gender Institute at Pretoria University and the Women's Research and Training Centre at Aden University in the Yemen. I write and research on the politics of gender, gender equality and gender violence. My husband, David Walwyn, is a great support. We have two sons, Thomas and Benjamin – a major gender project.

### **Nthabiseng Motsemme**

Exploring questions of identity and cultural location, Nthabiseng Motsemme has written and published extensively on voices and voicing. She has analysed the politics of fashion and style in forms of self-expression among young urban African women and is currently completing her PhD looking at issues of HIV/AIDS, love, intimacy and the politics of survival.

### **Raymond Suttner**

I would not have imagined writing a chapter on gender for such a book as this, some years ago. I was researching the history of underground organisation and continually encountered relationships which, I now see, can only be adequately explained by tools derived from feminism and gender studies in general. I am a Research Fellow in the History Department at the University of South Africa, Pretoria

### **Jennifer Weir**

My interest in women leaders developed during my PhD research, and has continued to develop in various ways since then – including my current employment, which is outside of my discipline of history. I am a Senior Lecturer in academic staff development within the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) at Murdoch University in Australia. As part of this work, I am interested in the leadership development of academic women, gender schemas within universities, and power relationships.

### **Elizabeth van Heyningen**

I started my career as a conventional political historian, but a move into social history, especially the social history of medicine, gave me an interest in the neglected role of women in South African history. I have worked on prostitution and medical legislation in the nineteenth-century Cape and on colonial women seen particularly through the lens of their own writing. I am at present engaged in a major study on the medical history of the women in the concentration camps of the South African War.

## Picture credits

- pp. 21, Mary Ralphs  
p. 25 South African National Library  
pp. 29, 30 Mary Ralphs  
p. 31 Cape Archives  
p. 45 South African National Library  
p. 51 Godee Molsbergen E (1922) *Reizen in Zuid-Afrika in de Hollandse Tijd*, Vol 3 S:265. Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff  
p.52 detail from map on p. 51  
p. 53 South African National Library, Stow & Bleek (1930) *Rock Paintings in South Africa from parts of the Eastern Province and Orange Free State*, 17. London: Methuen  
p. 54 University of the Witwatersrand, Rock Art Research Institute, RSA DRM 1-42; p. 55 South African National Library  
p. 56 Backhouse J (1844) *A Narrative of a Visit to the Mauritius and South Africa*, 217. London:Hamilton, Adams & Co.  
p. 57 Cape Archives  
p. 58 South African National Library  
p. 59 University of the Witwatersrand, Rock Art Research Institute, RSA-BEH1-1R  
p. 61 Jill Wenman  
p. 62 South African National Library  
p. 64 Cape Archives  
p. 65 Cape Archives  
p. 66 Wilma Cruise  
p. 69 Eddie Dube, pavement art commissioned and photographed by Helen Bradford  
p. 71 Siler M (1982) The Angolan Incursion. *Ufahamu*, 11(3):48;  
p. 73 Cape Archives  
p. 74 Chief Directorate Surveys and Mapping, 1953 photograph, 33600601665  
p. 76 Cory Library, Daniell (1804-05: np)  
p. 79 Top: Cape Arvchives,  
Bottom: South African National Library;  
p. 80 Nomsa Zamela. Pavement art commissioned, purchased and photographed by Helen Bradford  
p. 82 Christie's Images Limited TOP. 140795091  
p. 83 Helen Bradford  
p. 85 Simthembile Mamaniu, used with kind permission of the artist  
p. 97 Free State Repository  
p. 102 Top: War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein  
Bottom: Free State Repository  
p. 103 Free State Repository

- p. 104 War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein  
p. 115 Free State Repository  
p. 155 Mpelilape Martha Masina from *A place in the City by Luli Callinicos*, published by Maskew Miller Longman  
p. 165 Museum Africa  
p. 167 Rand Daily Mail  
pp. 171, 179 & 180 Personal collection of Mmapula Helen Sebidi  
p. 194 Left and right: Garment Workers Union  
p. 195,197 UCT Archives  
p.198,199 Mayibuye Archive, IDAF collection  
p. 251 Margaret Randall  
p. 252 Personal collection of Dipuo Mvelase  
p. 258 Africa Media on Line (Paul Weinberg)  
p. 262 ECC sticker  
p. 266 Africa Media on Line (Rafs Mayet)  
p. 270 Africa Media on Line (Gill de Vlieg)  
p. 281 Archives of the Evening Post (johnnic Eastern Cape)  
p. 328 Benny Gool  
p. 349 Sheila Meintjies  
pp. 403, 405 Sally Shorkend  
pp. 424, 434, 436 Mary Ralphs  
Cover and part dividers: Mary Ralphs  
In some instances we have been unable to trace the copyright holders but will make appropriate arrangements at the first opportunity.